



MAN'S BOOK

BRAZEN CHARIOTS

Robert Crisp



THE BIG STILL

Roderick Wilkinson



THE MIDNIGHT SEA

Ian Cameron



also two short stories

THAT MARK HORSE

and

TAKES A REAL MAN

by Jack Schaefer



ODHAMS PRESS LIMITED

LONG ACRE, LONDON

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T.1259.S.

MADE AND PRINTED IN
GREAT BRITAIN BY ODHAMS (WATFORD) LTD.
WATFORD, HERTS

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BRAZEN CHARIOTS

Robert Crisp, D.S.O., M.C.



*"Brazen Chariots" is published by
Frederick Muller, Ltd.*

The Author

Robert Crisp, well-known in the cricket world and a former South African Test cricketer, was born in India. He was educated in South Africa and Rhodesia and has been a journalist since 1928. *Brazen Chariots* gives the story of his life during the war years.

Mr. Crisp now lives in England, on a farm on the Suffolk and Norfolk borders, specializing in ducklings and goslings, and continues his journalistic career with the *East Anglian Daily Times*.

FOREWORD

by

Field-Marshal Lord Harding, G.C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C.

THIS book contains a vivid and stirring story of war—of fighting in tanks against a brave and better-equipped foe in the wide and desolate spaces of the Western Desert. It is the day-by-day story of the life of a man who fought with great courage and daring; a man who knew fear but overcame it, who unhesitatingly put his duty before his own comfort and safety.

Knowing the man and the conditions in which he and his comrades fought—and won—this story rings true to me. It is full of excitement, and full of the agonies and the anxieties of battle.

As I am sure he would be the first to admit, Bob Crisp was not alone in his experiences and achievements. There were others like him—amateur soldiers to start with who made up by their courage and their resolution for their lack of training and their inferior equipment—and for the lack of proper direction too.

This story has a moral for the public and for our leaders today. From all that I have seen of the younger generations since the war, they are not wanting in courage, nor in a sense of duty to their country. Let us hope that the lesson of the dangers of being unprepared that cost us so dear in the early days of both world wars have at last been learnt. This brave story of a little-known part of the Second World War should help to drive it home.

It is for the people of this country and our leaders—political and military—to ensure that if the Bob Crisps of the future have to fight in our defence the dice are loaded in their favour and not against them. Will they? I wonder.

HARDING, F.-M.

28th August 1958

A map of the battleground appears on
pages 48 and 49

THE DAYS BEFORE

THE Italians were in Sollum; the Afrika Korps and Rommel stood confident and menacing around beleagured Tobruk; The Wire rolled inviolate down the whole length of the Libyan frontier.

In Cairo, the cricket match between Gezira Sporting Club and an England XI was in a very critical state.

I took two wickets in one over, including that of Wally Hammond, and the applause rippled round the khaki-crowded ground. The applause was for me, and I enjoyed it, as I always have done, but it could not drown the sound of distant gunfire.

It was July 1941. Many of the soldiers sitting under the jacaranda trees, spilling over the boundary brown on the green turf, had recently come back from Wavell's brief failure to regain the initiative in the Western Desert. That was Operation Battleaxe, as abortive as it sounded obsolete, and it was allowed to die unsung while the Gezira second innings occupied the headlines in the *Egyptian Gazette*.

On the first day of the previous May I had stumbled off the cargo boat at Port Said with what was left of the 3rd Battalion of the Royal Tank Regiment after the three-months' disaster of Greece and Crete. It was a tank battalion without tanks and without tank crews, an identification number with a few human beings to give it some sort of personality. Then, Egypt and the life-line of the Suez Canal were threatened by a pincer-movement from north and west, and everybody in battledress was utilized in some sort of defensive service, however divorced from original employment or contemplation.

The remnants of 3R.T.R. were not exempt. After seven days' leave we found ourselves engaged in the local defence of the R.A.F. station at Heliopolis aerodrome, with a stand-to at first light and a stand-to at last light and the intervening day filled with drill and kit inspections and all the ordained occupations for idle hands that seven months in O.C.T.U. had taught me to dislike so much.

Our leisure hours were spent pleasantly enough, sipping tall,

cool John Collins' on the paved perimeter of the swimming pool of the Heliopolis Club, eyeing with indecent speculation the cosmopolitan bathing beauties of the region, their figures still trim in youth but burgeoning with discerning plumpness in promise of early seduction. Later, as we got to know our way around, we deserted the unrequited lovelies of Heliopolis and sipped our tall, cool John Collins' around the swimming pool at Gezira, where the only difference was that there was more of everything, and it was not so unrequited.

I was a newly promoted captain. Not for the first time. I had established what must have been a record in swift promotion by being made a captain three months after I had been commissioned in June of the previous year. I owed this entirely to the fact that I had played cricket for South Africa and my commanding officer had once played county cricket for Hampshire. After Dunkirk he had been a bit short of suitable types, and I had found myself making the most unexpected holes in my shoulder tabs to accommodate the extra pips. I had no great personal interest in the proceedings, and the situation was speedily rectified as far as the more senior lieutenants were concerned after I had missed the convoy taking the regiment to the Middle East when it called in at Durban. (I had worked in Durban on the *Natal Mercury* for the year before the war started.)

I was in good company—a brigade major, another major, two captains—and we were able to rejoin the convoy only by reason of my friendship with the captain of the cruiser escort whom I had known in his Simon's Town days. By the time we were all back on the troopship somewhere in the Indian Ocean I was 2nd Lieut. Crisp again, with a terrible hang-over from Plymouth gin.

But the Greek adventure had removed two-thirds of the officers, and in the brotherhood of survival it was almost inevitable that Durban should be forgotten and Old Trafford remembered. There were other factors. Down the long, bomb-torn roads of Greece I found I was more reluctant to show my fear than most, and this seemed to be acknowledged by those about me. I think it helped towards my reinstatement as captain; that and the C.O.'s unimpaired fondness for cricket.

Defence duties, training and re-equipping were the banal watchwords of our existence. We forgot them whenever we could at the sporting clubs, at Groppi's, on the roof of the Continental,

in Shepheard's bar or Tommy's and, on more opulent evenings, at the huntin'-shootin'-fishin' auberge out on the Mena Road where we occasionally shared the same dance floor with King Farouk. Indeed, on one memorable morning I thumbed a lift into Cairo, considerably after the hours of normal transport and before it was due to start up again, and found myself sitting in the back of a sumptuous sports car with a sumptuous girl in the front alongside the ruler of all Egypt. I have always had a soft spot for Farouk since that night.

It was all very pleasant, and I kept on telling myself that this was the way American millionaires spent a lot of their millions. But the past three months had changed a lot of things for me. One thing I had discovered was that life can be most enjoyable and rewarding in the contemplation of possible death. And I had found out a lot about myself and the people I was fighting the war with. Defence duties, training and re-equipping . . . Gezira, cricket, John Collins'. It all contrasted too brazenly with the dark, recent memory of war-ravaged Greece and the noisy desert that waited for us.

I walked off the cricket field that July evening feeling that I had to get out of Cairo. Later that night, drinking beer with some New Zealanders and listening to their stories of adventures deep in enemy territory with the Long Range Desert Group, I thought I had found the answer. Next morning I got off early and went straight to Kasr-el-Nil barracks to see Colonel Prendergast, the youngish tank officer who commanded the L.R.D.G. I told him what I wanted, and he agreed at once to have me transferred to his unit. He said he could more or less ask for anybody he liked, and he would put in an application for me right away. He told me what sort of things I would have to buy, and added that I would probably hear from him in a few days. I walked out elated and went straight to the big N.A.A.F.I. stores farther along the river bank and bought myself half-a-dozen shoulder flashes—red L.R.D.G. on a black background. It was all I could do not to tell everybody back at Heliopolis.

Three days later a message arrived at our orderly room for me to call at L.R.D.G. headquarters.

"You're not leaving us, are you, Bob?" the adjutant asked me.
"Not that I know of."

"Want to visit those night spots in Benghazi, eh? Not a chance, cock."

I didn't know whether he knew anything or not, so I kept my mouth shut and went off fearing the worst. The adjutant was right. Colonel Prendergast simply told me that his application for my transfer had been negatived because of the shortage of trained tank crews in the Middle East. No tank personnel could hope to get a transfer to anything or anywhere.

Gone were my dreams of the wide sand-seas of Libya and the green groves of Cyrenaica running down to the Mediterranean, and the freedom of independent movement far from brigadiers and colonels and standing orders. It was defence duties and training for me, with everybody else, and no way past it.

I went back to Heliopolis unhappy but in the mood to make the best of it. Fortunately, the tempo of events speeded up considerably in the next month or two, and we all got a vague impression of something big being concocted. New men were arriving every week to replace the losses in Greece, and in August the first of our new tanks was delivered. We had seen the sleek, fast Crusader tanks that were going to other armoured regiments in Egypt at that time, but knew they were not for us. We were to get an American tank known officially as the American M3 Light Cavalry Tank—Stuart for short.

Until then we had been equipped with ancient A10s and A13s, and even some A9s dragged out of various war museums and exhibitions. They were ponderous square things, like mobile pre-fab houses and just about as flimsy. By far their worst failing was their complete inability to move more than a mile or two in any sort of heavy going without breaking a track, or shedding one on a sharp turn.

Of the 60 odd tanks 3R.T.R. had taken to Greece at the beginning of the year, not half a dozen were casualties of direct enemy action. All the others had been abandoned with broken tracks or other mechanical breakdowns. They littered the passes and defiles of Macedonia and Thessaly, stripped of their machine-guns, but otherwise intact. They were of no help to the enemy; no other army would have contemplated using them. I like to think of them, even now, furnishing some sort of chilly, overcrowded dwelling place for a family of homeless Greek peasants.

Whoever was responsible for the design of British tanks in between the wars ought to have a considerable weight on his conscience. As a matter of fact the design was due not to any one particular individual, but had been conceived by a pressure group,

obsessed by an obsolete idea. The principle influence brought to bear on tank design and tactics was the cavalry school of thought. The strategists wanted to make a tank which was as much like a horse as possible, and which could be used in action in more or less the same way. The Charge of the Light Brigade was their idea of the proper way to fight a battle. They merely substituted tanks for horses.

Very unfortunately for the Royal Armoured Corps, the cavalry influence predominated at the War Office before and during the last war (it probably still does) and the fast, lightly-armoured tank was the result. Unfortunately, too, many cavalry regiments employed the same gallant tactics as the Earl of Cardigan. They learnt the hard way.

We regarded the advent of our new tanks with a good deal more vital interest than a newly-married couple inspecting their first home. We were also fascinated by the group of American Army technicians who came with them.

The Stuart was a strange-looking contraption, straight from Texas, tall in the saddle and with the Western flavour accentuated by a couple of Browning machine-guns and the rangy Texans. The main armament was similar to the peashooter that all British tanks carried at that time, but the frontal armour was much thicker than in our own light tanks and cruisers. The really intriguing things about the M3 were its engine and the tracks. Drivers gasped in astonishment when the back covers were lifted off . . . it was simply an aeroplane engine stuck in a tank, with radial cylinders and a fan that looked like a propeller. Fuel was to present a new problem to the supply services, as the engine ran efficiently only on high octane aviation spirit. But this was not our problem, and the consensus of opinion was that anything that was likely to assist in a fast take-off was probably a good thing.

After the engines had received their share of comment, we gave our undivided attention to the tracks. There had never been anything like them in the British Army. Each track link was mounted in solid rubber blocks on which the vehicle moved. After one look we wondered why the hell British tank designers had never thought of it.

As soon as I could, I got my crew into one of the Stuarts and headed out of Heliopolis for the first patch of open, sandy desert—not always as easy to find as you might think. We tested her for speed first, and found that on good going we could get up to

40 m.p.h. It was a comforting thought, in the circumstances, to know that the German Marks III and IV could manage only 20 or so.

Then I told my driver, Whaley, to make a few fast turns, and waited with some foreboding for the inevitable bang-clatter and swerving halt that meant a broken track. Nothing happened. It was wonderful. That tank handled like a well-trained cow-pony.

"Let's see just what it will take," I said down the intercom. "Try and shed one of these tracks."

Whaley put her through a variety of turns and manoeuvres that made the sandy floor of the desert look like an ice-rink after a hockey match, spurting up great fountains of sand and dust behind the tracks.

"That'll do," I shouted to the driver at last. "We're beginning to wear out the desert."

Back at the camp the C.O. and a small crowd were waiting for us. We climbed out, all grinning happily.

"Well, Whaley," I asked my driver, "what do you think of it?"

He, plainly under the influence of the nearby Texan, beamed and said simply: "It's a honey, sir."

From that moment they were never known as anything else.

It was the first practical and beneficial effect of Anglo-American co-operation on land in that theatre of the war, and although the Americans jibbed a bit at the fourteen modifications that our tank experts thought necessary to introduce, it set the atmosphere for the many subsequent occasions when American technicians had to instruct British tank crews in new types of American tanks.

At the end of August, 3R.T.R. moved from Heliopolis to Beni Yusef, some 20 miles the other side of Cairo, where we joined up with the other two armoured units of the 4th Armoured Brigade —the 8th Hussars and 5R.T.R. It was a bleak, hot and dusty place of long tin huts and tents, where we sheltered and swore our way through training and re-equipping, our grunts and groans swelling the raucous chorus from the adjacent Camel Patrol of the Egyptian Army.

My only light relief was provided by my batman's letters to his wife, which I had to censor. He was a holder-upper in civilian life, and wielded his pen like a riveting hammer with about three words to the page, most of which were abusive references to the "auld-wife". This was a female I could not identify until a

visiting officer of the Scots Guards told me it was a mother-in-law. After one spell of about three weeks without a letter home I mentioned to my batman during the course of general conversation that he did not seem to be corresponding with his wife, and I hoped nothing had gone wrong. That afternoon he produced a letter which began: "Dear Wife, I am sorry you have not had my last three letters which were sunk by enemy action. Tell the auld-bitch. . . ."

Beni Yusef was a little too remote from the centre of Cairo to get the full flavour of impending events. We heard of Wavell's dismissal, of course (and were astonished by it), and his replacement by Auchinleck, but we sensed only dimly the new urgency that was creeping into everything. The nearest we got to it, except on our occasional visits to Gezira, was the oft-repeated remark of "A" Squadron's major, who had been a pre-war subaltern in India under Auchinleck . . . "Bloody good chap, the Auk."

On the whole, we all regarded our removal to Beni Yusef as a piece of typical staff bloody-mindedness.

By the end of September we were a fully-equipped battalion again, with men and machines up to strength. Reorganization under a new commanding officer, Bunny Ewins, had confirmed me as a captain, second-in-command of "C" squadron, which meant I kept my troop of Honeys. This suited me fine. I had no ambitions as far as promotion was concerned. I wanted to be left alone to run my troop the way I wanted to run it. The extra money was the only significant feature; I had always found it difficult to reconcile a lieutenant's pay with a major's tastes.

At this time a steady flow of top-ranking brass, including General Cunningham, fresh from his triumphs in East Africa, and—for some curious reason—the Maharajah of Kashmir, began visiting our camp. It all added up to something, and soon we learnt that a great new organization had been formed with Cunningham in command. They called it the Eighth Army.

It will help in an understanding of subsequent events if I give a brief description of the set-up of 4th Armoured Brigade. It was a comprehensive operational unit composed of the three tank regiments I have referred to, each of which had attached to it a troop of 25-pounder guns of the Royal Horse Artillery, a detachment of the Scots Guards and anti-tank and anti-aircraft units. The whole was commanded by Brigadier Alec Gatehouse, D.S.O., M.C., who could be described as a tank officer as distinct from a

cavalry officer, and who was probably the best handler of armour in the desert at the time.

It was the first fully self-contained combat team on such a large scale in the British Army, and I mention it in some detail because it was destined to play such a decisive part in a campaign in which control often evaporated and units disintegrated. Within this entity we were to move and fight, eat and sleep a little, die and nearly die every day and night for the next five weeks.

According to Gatehouse's records, the brigade was in action continuously for the first fourteen days of this period without rest or maintenance, and with an average of two battles a day; the brigade centre line covered 1,700 miles and many unit tanks travelled over 3,000; 172 Honeys were knocked out by the enemy in five weeks (the total strength was 163) and I myself had six tanks knocked out; the average sleep for commanders during the fourteen days was one and a half hours in twenty-four; at the end of the campaign the 400 tanks under Rommel's command had been reduced to 58.

Fortunately for our peace of mind these were events which lay well-concealed and certainly unimagined in the dust and smoke of the future.

The first week in October saw us encamped on the barren spaces west of the Cairo-Fayoum road, for our battle practice with live ammunition.

An inter-troop and inter-squadron competition was arranged to add a little stimulus to the exercise. Troop by troop we went off to the firing area on the wide-open spaces west of the Fayoum Road. I had an idea which I wanted to try out. It was inspired by the fact that enemy anti-tank weapons, especially the newly-introduced 88-mm. gun that had played havoc with our tanks in the ill-fated Battleaxe show, could knock us out at 3,000 yards, whereas the maximum effective range of our 37-mm. and 2-pounder guns was reckoned to be about 1,200. (This turned out to be wildly optimistic.) The result, in simple arithmetic, was that we would have to be within range of their tanks and guns for 1,800 yards before we could hope to get close enough to do any damage. Eighteen hundred yards, in those circumstances, is a long way. It's sixty-four thousand eight hundred inches.

My mind was occupied with two problems: how to get near enough to the enemy, and how to live long enough to get there. Obviously, armour-plating was not enough protection. There

were alarming stories going about of what the 88s could do to the massive turrets of the I-tanks, hitherto considered almost impenetrable. The only answer lay in mobility, and pretty fast mobility at that.

At the same time I completely discounted the possibility of shooting accurately from a moving tank, which was what we had all been taught to do when it was not possible to take up a hull-down position. So I worked out a system in my troop whereby, after the target had been indicated, a more or less automatic procedure followed if the circumstances were favourable. The objective was to get close enough to the enemy tank to be able to destroy it. The first order, then, was "Driver advance; flat out." The gunner would do his best to keep the cross-wires of his telescopic sight on the target all the time we were moving. The next order, heard by gunner, driver and loader would be "Driver halt". As soon as the tank stopped and he was on target, the gunner would fire without further command from me. The sound of the shot was the signal for the driver to let in his clutch and be off again. From stop to start it took about four seconds. All I did was to control the movement and direction of the tank.

The battle practice convinced me that I was right, and that in tanks that were outgunned and outarmoured, mobility was an essential element in survival. Needless to say, by "mobility" I did not mean speed in the wrong direction.

I did not win any competitions, but I had established to my own satisfaction that I could get within the effective range of my own gun without the use of concealment and in a fairly aggressive manner. I put myself in the place of a man in the target, and thought it would be very disconcerting to have four tanks thundering down on top of you, all firing accurately and none of them in one position long enough to be aimed at. I was hopeful that by using these tactics whenever the ground permitted, I would very much lessen the chances of being hit. It was not a substitute for the best battle position, which was hull-down upon ground of your own choosing, but I was quite certain that an over-emphasis on the hull-down position in what was going to be a war of considerable movement was not a good thing. It tended to induce in tank commanders a hull-down mind, which was quite likely to develop into a turret-down mind.

By great good fortune, on our return to Beni Yusef from the firing range, I managed to get jaundice, and spent two weeks in

the 15th General Hospital, on the Nile opposite Gezira Island, eating boiled chicken and rice and watching the full-sailed dhows go by, while the battalion packed up laboriously and moved on westwards. It was the first major step towards the impending battle, and it took them to the Siwa track, south of Mersah Matruh. That is where I rejoined them.

We were about 90 miles east of The Wire—that fabulous entanglement that snaked rustily all along the border from the coast till it lost itself in the great dunes of the Sand Sea down in the south. It had been built by Mussolini's soldiers years before, to keep out camels and itinerant Arabs who were inclined to regard the Libya-Egyptian frontier as a figment of Il Duce's imagination. Between strong points The Wire was patrolled very occasionally by the Italians on one side and almost constantly by the British on the other. There were some well-established breaches in a continuous state of demolition and repair.

Here, at Abar Kenayis, swarms of R.A.O.C. and R.A.S.C. types descended on our tanks with metal tubing and rolls of hessian. In a few days they had transformed each regiment of tanks into what looked like a convoy of 3-ton lorries. In the dubious interests of security these camouflage devices were known as Sunshields. We were to keep them in position until the order was given "Drop Sunshields", by which time, it was darkly hinted, we would be well inside enemy territory. There is every reason to believe the deception was successful, and that Rommel had no idea that something like 600 tanks had been moved up within striking distance of his forces.

It was in this guise that in the first week in November we moved up to a place called Hallequat, south of the road running between Sidi Barrani and Sollum. This was virtually the forming-up point for the brigade for the attack which everybody knew was now imminent, though nobody knew when or where. From the march to Hallequate there resulted one of those imperial flaps without which no British army has yet succeeded in entering a battle.

The march from Kenayis to Hallequat was made at night, over what proved to be 80 miles of some of the most murderous going in the Western Desert. It was nearly all hard limestone outcrop, but the full extent of the damage to our tanks was not even suspected until daylight, when we had reached our destination. We then saw that the rubber blocks on the tracks of

practically every Honey in the brigade had been chewed to bits.

General Gatehouse has since told me what happened when the full extent of this calamity became known. He reported the matter to John Harding (now Field-Marshal Lord Harding) at Corps Headquarters, and was told to fly to Cairo with Exhibit A and see the Commander-in-Chief. This Gatehouse did, and got an immediate reaction from Auchinleck, who gave orders to strip the tracks off every Honey in rear areas and send them up immediately by rail to 4th Armoured Brigade. The tattered tracks were to be sent back for repair if possible and use on training. He also decided that the brigade should be moved to a more suitable area by transporters. Such was the impetus behind these instructions that everything was carried out and completed in three days.

This was our last but one stopping place before Operation Crusader started, and the last bit of leisure we would have for perfecting our fighting equipment and sending off our final messages of undying love and devotion. Here, too, we learnt for the first time the art of night-leaguering, though it was a familiar enough blackboard diagram. It was a simple and effective manœuvre for getting all tanks into a compact square, with the thin-skinned vehicles inside, ready to fan out at first light into an offensive formation. We practised it and practised it until we could do it blindfold—which was more or the less the way we had to do it in the pitch dark of the desert night after disengagement from battle at last light.

A rather odd thing happened to me at this time. I had been sent out in charge of a small recce party in a 15-cwt. truck to see what the going was like ahead of our area. We had come across a patch of soft sand in which the truck got stuck, and needed a good deal of manhandling to get out. With two or three others I was pushing and heaving at the back of the vehicle, cursing volubly as the wheels spun round kicking up the desert into our eyes and ears, when there was a sudden soft, fluttering noise in my ear, and I felt a light touch on my back.

I took a casual glance from the corner of my eye, and was amazed to see a pigeon sitting on my shoulder. Nobody else had noticed it, and as I stopped and straightened I put my hand up slowly expecting any second that the bird would take fright and fly off again. Instead it seemed to come willingly into my hand, where it snuggled down contentedly. Only then did I notice the tube of white paper fastened to its leg by a piece of elastic. I

called to the others. They gaped when they saw what I was holding, and walked back towards me. I pointed to the piece of paper.

"A carrier pigeon!" said Harry Maegraith. "How the hell did you get hold of that?"

Maegraith was an Australian troop commander in "C" Squadron. We had been in England and Greece together, and when his ancient tank had broken down somewhere in Macedonia he had jumped on the back of mine with a few other bogs. We were great friends.

While I gently slid the elastic off the pigeon's leg, I told them what had happened. There was a strange air of unreality about the whole thing which impressed all of us. As far as I knew we were 10 or 15 miles from the nearest British formation. There was nothing in sight except sand, rock and scrub. What was this mysterious paper that had come fluttering down on to my shoulder from an empty sky above an empty land? A message from some remote patrol lost in the desert? Could it be a German carrier pigeon with a secret signal from the High Command?

The others clustered round, caught in the mystery of the moment, holding their breath while I unfolded the curled slip. It made a dry, rustling sound that could have been heard twenty yards away. Slowly I opened it out until the pencilled message lay revealed. It was in English and said simply: "Bugger you, leave me alone."

There was a moment of shocked incredulity, and then we burst into simultaneous roars. It was a good ten minutes before we recovered enough wind to start pushing again.

We discussed possibilities. The popular theory, to which I subscribed, was that it had come from our own technical sergeant. It was exactly the sort of thing he would do, and his LAD lorry, a great cavern of a thing filled with all the paraphernalia necessary for keeping a regiment of tanks on the move, became a sort of general depository for everything. Personally, I would not have been surprised if, somewhere in the deep recesses of that ten-tonner, he had a chaise-longue and a couple of Gippo bints. A pigeon was really pretty insignificant stuff for the LAD lorry. The Tech. Sergeant denied all knowledge of the bird when I took it along to him, but I left it there. It seemed to settle in surprisingly quickly.

November 13 was the day on which we heard all about it—the

full gen, as it was called. The C.O. had been along to Brigade in the morning and told us in the afternoon. After we had crayoned all the rings and lines and arrows on our maps we went back to our troops to pass on the information, in a state of great exhilaration and confidence. Briefly I told my crews the plan. All three armoured brigades were to be passed through The Wire with our support troops, and backed up by the New Zealand and South African infantry divisions. Most of the German and Italian forces were up in the coastal area, and we were to plonk ourselves down on their lines of communication between them and Benghazi. We were to take up battle positions of our own choosing and destroy the enemy armour when it attacked us. It seemed that the rôle of 4th Armoured Brigade was to do most of the destroying in the centre, while the other two covered our flanks and joined in whenever possible. It seemed a pretty good idea to me, and when I showed the troops my map and where we were going, deep into enemy territory, their eyes popped and their lips whistled. It was all they could do to stop themselves cheering. We were all a bit like schoolboys on the last night of term.

On November 15 we moved forward to the final jumping-off place and, still looking like a field-park of 3-ton lorries, made our final preparations for battle. These preparations included a farewell cocktail party given by the Scots Guards. Two evenings later, at ten minutes to six, with only the shreds of daylight hanging in the western sky, we formed up into long columns of tanks and guns and vehicles and headed west into the night and destiny.

It was soon so dark that the drivers could only dimly discern the outlines of the tank or lorry a foot or two in front of them. It became necessary for the navigator at the head of the column to dismount and walk ahead. So we proceeded slowly through the night, nose to tail, the desert filled with the low-geared roaring of radials and the creaking protestations of hundreds of springs and bogie wheels. To north and south of us the silence of the empty sands was shattered by similar long, deadly snakes, weaving forward for the strike.

It was not long after midnight when we halted, and the message came back by word-of-mouth (there was an unbreakable wireless silence imposed) that the head of the column had reached The Wire, and there would be no further movement until ordered. I told my crews to get some sleep. "God knows," I said, just to keep them cheerful, "when you'll get another opportunity—unless it's

forever." I curled up myself in between the camouflage netting and bed-rolls on the warm bonnet of the engine.

But there was to be little sleep that night. Dimly ahead we could hear the detonations of the explosives as the demolition parties blew the gaps in The Wire through which the Eighth Army were to pass. But soon these puny explosions were mingled with and overwhelmed by a terrific thunderstorm which broke over the coastal area to the north. Vivid flashes of lightning poured swift floods of light over the desert in which the tanks were revealed in grotesque, unreal silhouettes that vanished before the eye could properly comprehend them.

Thunder burst over the escarpments, and rolled across the flat landscape in tidal waves of sound. Men muttered and moved uneasily beneath this bombardment, and made their preparations for the downpour. In our tanks we were lucky under the "sunshields" which we fortified with groundsheets and bivvy tents to make an enclosure which, if not exactly comfortable, was dry. I consoled myself through the storm with the thought that at least it would lay the dust for the morrow.

FIRST DAY

THE first grey light in the east awoke me and brought slow, reluctant movement to the whole column. We got permission for a quick brew—the mug of tea which was to become very nearly the most important institution in the desert war. God knows how many gallons of precious petrol were used up during that and subsequent campaigns in bringing kettles to the boil. Half-hearted attempts were made to prevent it while armoured regiments lay stranded with empty petrol tanks, but generals and brigadiers as well as troopers and privates came to recognize the moral effect of "a brew", and it was never seriously discouraged. In the grim days and nights that followed November 18 it was an incredible but not unusual sight to see some tank crew, temporarily immobile or disengaged but still under fire, huddled over a sand-and-petrol stove making tea. It was also inevitable, during any sort of lull in the battle to hear some voice on the air calling up the C.O. and saying "Hullo JAGO, JAGO Two calling. May we brew up?" Once, in the middle of an action down near El Gubi, many days and many lives later, we heard a distinctive Teuton voice saying on our regi-

mental wireless frequency "Hullo BALO, BALO calling. You may brrrew up." The battle paused while the whole regiment rocked with laughter. I have no doubt some died laughing.

Shortly after 7 o'clock we got the order to move. It was a long, jerky and peaceful operation, not at all like the beginning of the great adventure we thought it should be. Petrol dumps had been established during the night a few miles west of The Wire, at which each Honey filled up as it passed. It was 10 o'clock before my troop reached the gap and passed through under the control of a number of staff officers and military police. It was like a passage along Piccadilly in the rush hour, and a good deal less dangerous for pedestrians.

The excitement returned as we headed at a good pace north-west into enemy territory towards a point known as Gabr el Salegh. This, it was expected, would be where we would fight and defeat the Afrika Korps. The Wire had been a disappointing thing in its rusty inadequacy, and I think we all felt a little let-down that, at such a critical moment, nothing at all had happened. And the sand and scrub of Cyrenaica looked just the same as the sand and scrub of Egypt.

We were in the battalion open-order formation now, the whole brigade moving swiftly towards its first objective. The hessian disguise still concealed our tanks, but not an enemy plane appeared all day to give the no doubt surprising information that hundreds of 3-ton lorries were advancing towards Tobruk from the south-east.

At 3.30 in the afternoon the first operational order flashed through the wireless . . . "Drop Sunshields". The camouflage fell apart as we rolled on, littering desert for miles around and bringing great joy to any wandering Bedouin who could get to them before the R.A.S.C. picked them up. We quite often passed isolated groups of Arabs and camels. It was always a chimerical vision, a glimpse of a world which had no part in ours.

With the disappearance of the sunshields the wireless aerials were released, and floating from the top of them were the twin yellow pennants which each British tank carried for identification. In moments of quick decision it was assumed that tanks or armoured cars without pennants were hostile. Very often the masts were lowered to assist concealment, and undoubtedly a number of Eighth Army v. Eighth Army encounters took place as a result.

The speed at which we were going, the vast, clean space all

round new-washed by the night's rain, and the awareness of participation in great events that possessed us all, restored our feeling of elation. Beyond this excitement I would say that the dominating emotion in my mind was an immense curiosity. Not just about the substantial things of war—tanks and guns and infantrymen and armour-piercing shells. There was an extraordinary inquisitiveness that always possessed me in strange new places and circumstances; but above all there was this curiosity about the immediate future and what would happen in it... what would happen to me. Not for one moment did I contemplate the possibility of anything unpleasant, and with that went an assumption that there was bound to be a violent encounter with the enemy, that it would end in our favour, and that if anything terrible were going to happen it would probably happen to other people but not to me.

As we rushed on I was conscious all the time of the vast forces deployed to east and west, and of the screens of armoured cars—South Africans, 11th Hussars, King's Dragoon Guards—which were spread across the desert ahead. We knew that we could hit nothing and nothing could hit us without the air being full of the crackling messages from the recce men in front.

Morning turned to afternoon and afternoon moved on to evening, and the desert stayed empty around us and the skies were as empty as the sands. We lined up again in queues to fill up with petrol. Our radial engines had a very limited range, and we were not to be long in discovering what this could mean in the swift-moving campaign that stretched down the days and nights to come.

At 4.30 we reached our apportioned battle position. A vaguely discernible cairn of stones marked Point 185 on the trig. survey. A little way to the north lay the equally indeterminate map-name of Gabr Taieb el Esem. We had travelled 65 miles since the dawn. There had been so sign of a German or an Italian. We spent the night more or less as we halted, knowing nothing, but tired enough for sleep to overcome anxiety and puzzlement.

SECOND DAY

BEFORE dawn the next morning we were up and in our action stations, checking the wireless set and listening to the cautious chatter of "B" Squadron, who were being sent off on a special mission in support of the KDGs. As the light grew we moved off

several miles due north, where we sat and watched nothing for another two hours with leisure enough to cook breakfast—bacon, biscuit, marmalade and hot tea.

Then came the message that we had all been waiting to hear, flickering through the hundreds of ear-phones on the battalion net: "Hullo DOMO, DOMO calling. DOMO will advance to Bir Gibni to intercept enemy column moving south."

A little surprised at the direction of the move, which was due east of us, we swung round on to the new bearing and moved briskly forward; not as carelessly as the previous day, but eager to start something. One could sense the mounting excitement that spread through each tank and from tank to tank through the whole battalion. In half an hour we reached Bir Gibni, eyes straining from the tops of turrets to the northern and eastern horizons for a glimpse of the significant silhouettes that would mean so much to each of us, one way or another. But the desert stayed flat, and was beginning to look vacuous. Later we were to get used to the daily "swans" into nothingness after nothingness, pursuing mirages of enemy conjured up by imagination and fear, mixed-up communications, mistranslated codes and nerve-racked commanders.

Later in the day we heard "B" Squadron reporting that they were trying to engage 7 tanks and 3 armoured cars. We all envied them. In another ten minutes there came the startling order to the remaining two squadrons to advance and engage 200 M.E.T. on the Trigh Capuzzo. I never did find out what M.E.T. stood for—mechanized enemy troops, perhaps?—but we all knew what it implied. 200 M.E.T. meant a long column of German vehicles ready to fall into our armoured lap. Later we were to discover that it also meant tanks and anti-tanks guns and the dreaded 88s—the fantastic anti-aircraft guns that the Afrika Korps converted into the war's deadliest anti-tank weapon. Many men were to die on each side of me in finding out exactly what M.E.T. meant.

The Trigh Capuzzo lay well north of the barren well of Gibni. It was an incredible highway stretching from horizon to horizon in an almost dead-straight line, and pounded down to a width of 50 or 60 yards by succeeding convoys all seeking the firm surface alongside the mutilated sand of the preceding column.

There was another brief order, telling "C" Squadron to attack the head of the column. I brought my troop over a long, low rise which ran down to the Trigh about a mile in front of me. There I

paused to let as many tanks as possible of the squadron come abreast of me in a hull-down position while I swept the column with my binoculars. It looked a piece of cake, with only a few armoured cars moving up and down the length of vehicles like shepherd dogs running beside a flock. I saw my other three tanks ready and waiting, and there was Harry alongside me grinning. I gave him the thumbs-up, and with a wide wave of my arm we were off.

We came over that crest 16 abreast and roared down the slope flat out, the wind catching the trailers of dust behind and flaunting them like banners of doom to the eyes of the watchers on the Trigh. We were all caught up in the exhilaration of that first charge. In a few seconds I could see the consternation in the enemy ranks translating itself into violent motion. There was the initial moment of immobility and shock, and then the whole line of vehicles broke and scattered wildly to the north and north-east. Every now and again a vehicle would pull up while its occupants disgorged on to the sand and ran or fell flat.

The main body of the enemy was making good its getaway, and, indeed, had virtually disappeared over one of the numerous escarpments by which the plateau dropped down to the sea. Maegraith and I were compelled to divert our attention from the fleeing transport to several armoured cars which were beginning to act in a hostile fashion. A couple of small Mark IIs were also bustling about like terriers with their teeth showing. We got two armoured cars and one of the light tanks, and a little later I came across a third one, hurriedly abandoned by the look of it, with petrol still pouring out underneath the engine into a pool on the sands. My gunner put a burst of tracer into the pool, and the whole thing roared up in orange flame and black smoke.

By this time we had left the Trigh Capuzzo miles behind. Some way to my front the land seemed to dip away into space. I guided the driver to the edge of a steepish escarpment, and gasped with astonishment at what I saw. Beyond the intervening belt of rock and sand and scrub rolled the sudden deep blue of the Mediterranean.

"Hells bells, Harry," I yelled into the mike, "I can see the sea."

Over to my right I got another shock. On the end of a promontory stretching out from the escarpment was a squat white building with what I thought was a minaret at one end. Through the binoculars it was revealed as a lighthouse, and beyond that I could

just see the roofs and walls of a sizeable village climbing out of a deep wadi below the lighthouse.

"Where the devil am I?" I muttered. Then it came to me. I was looking down on Bardia. I could hardly believe it, but it could be no other place. I scanned the intervening crests and depressions for some sign of the enemy and that column we had been chasing. Then Harry's voice came urgently: "Look out, Bob. There are some anti-tank guns on your left."

Even as he spoke I heard a sharp bang, and felt a slight shudder pass through the tank. I looked quickly down into the turret. There was nothing wrong in there, and I gave the order: "Driver reverse . . . advance left-about . . . speed up."

600 or 700 yards away, along the edge of the escarpment, little men moved agitatedly about a toy cannon. There was a puff of whitish smoke, and immediately I was conscious of something passing by in the air. It was time to get away.

The other tanks were clustered behind a couple of camelthorn bushes, and I thought how funny it was to duck instinctively behind something which could not possibly give any protection. I joined them behind the bushes and shouted at them that we'd better be getting back.

For the first time that afternoon I was able to take stock of time and place, and I was a little worried to see how low the meagre sun had sunk, turning the overcast a stormy red. A few lonely, derelict lorries and armoured cars littered the plateau, and several billowing uprights of smoke signalled the news of our first kills. I counted all seven tanks of our two troops, but of the rest of the squadron and the battalion there was no sign. Through the mike I spoke to Maegraith running alongside:

"Where the devil is everybody, Harry? Has the C.O. been on the air?"

"I haven't seen anybody else since we crossed the Trigh. We've been trying to raise the C.O. for the last twenty minutes, but can't get an acknowledgment."

I was not particularly concerned at that stage. There was no sign of any enemy on all that wide plain or along the clean-cut ridges. All I had to do was keep the sunset on my right shoulder, and I was pretty sure of getting back to friendly territory. The one thing that disturbed me was the petrol situation. We had come a long way since morning, and I did not fancy being stranded so far from base.

As the light failed I picked out a small group of armoured cars to the south, and we altered course slightly to approach them. I reckoned if they were enemy we could cope with them, while if they were friendly they would soon recognize the Honeys, which were like nothing else in the desert.

As we drew nearer I noticed a couple of men walk casually away from the cars towards us, and realized with considerable relief that the troop must belong to our own recce screen. I pulled up alongside and jumped down.

"Hullo," a young KDG subaltern said. "You had us worried for a bit, but there's no mistaking that shape. Where the dickens have you been?"

I told him briefly of our adventures, and then asked him for directions back to 3R.T.R. All he could tell me was a rough map reference for Brigade H.Q., and I decided to head that way and try and get in touch by wireless as we got nearer. Our course was south-west now, with barely ten minutes of light left in the sky and visibility at ground level reduced to a meagre hundred yards. Then I felt the tank moving jerkily, and got a tug on my trousers.

"Whaley says we're out of petrol," my gunner shouted up at me.

I swore quickly, and then got on the air to the other tanks and told them to halt. The tank commanders came over. We had a quick conference, and decided that as all tanks would shortly be out of petrol we would leaguer where we were and try and get into communication with H.Q. The blackness of night was upon us now, and we felt fairly secure in its impenetrability. I formed the tanks into a solid ring with guns facing outwards. My operator started yelling, and while I was still telling him not to make such a bloody row he shouted that he had got the C.O. on the air.

I jumped on to the turret, and swiftly explained the position. The C.O. said briefly that he had been trying to get us back all the afternoon and asked for our position. I made a very wild estimate, and he said he would send a petrol lorry out to me. There would be an officer with a wireless set, and we would have to guide him as much as possible. I handed the mike back to the operator, and told him not to let go of that petrol lorry—or else we'd all be in the bag, or worse, in the morning. Then I prayed that I had not been too far out in my map reference, which placed us about five miles from the battalion leaguer.

Half an hour later the replenishment officer came on the air to tell us he was on his way, and would we let him have some toffee

apples. This was the irrelevant name used for tracer bullets fired skyward in the night to indicate position. As long as it did not coincide with an air raid, it was an adequate signal, and had the great merit of brevity, lasting just long enough for the expectant watcher to take a bearing. I got Maegraith to stand by with a tommy-gun, and then said into the mike: "Toffee apples coming up . . . now!" Harry pulled the trigger for about two seconds, filling the silence with an alarmingly staccato racket while the red dots streamed upward into the darkness. I had the phones glued to my ears and for a few moments there was an awful silence. Then the blessed words: "Have seen your toffee apples. Coming in soon. Watch out for me."

It was well after midnight when we slunk into the battalion leaguer. The C.O. was still a bit peeved about our disappearance, but was mollified when I told him of our quite successful little raid. To our astonishment the other half of "C" Squadron was still missing, and did not, in fact, get back until after sunrise.

The Colonel put us in the picture. There had been a heavy attack on 8th Hussars in the afternoon, and it was to go to their assistance that all our tanks had been so urgently needed. Other officers told me how they had seen the Hussars charging into the Jerry tanks, sitting on top of their turrets more or less with their whips out. "It looked like the run-up to the first fence at a point-to-point," the adjutant described it.

This first action was very typical of a number of those early encounters involving cavalry regiments. They had incredible enthusiasm and dash, and sheer exciting courage which was only curbed by the rapidly decreasing stock of dashing officers and tanks.

Very early on in that campaign I learnt when to be gallant and when to be discreet, and how to employ both characteristics to the best advantage of myself. Nearly every risk had to be calculated; bravery, as far as I was concerned, became a matter of judicious discrimination and making the most of an opportunity. It is, after all, of very little use to yourself or your army to be very brave and very dead.

That night, back in leaguer and shared security, I was full of confidence. We had put the enemy to flight, done him some damage and were unharmed ourselves. Maegraith and I returned to our troops from the C.O. feeling rather pleased with ourselves and looking forward to daylight and its possibilities.

When I got back, the LAD gang were at work under the Honey,

with all the paraphernalia of repair littering the sand in the concealed island of light.

"What's wrong, Sergeant?" I asked.

"You mean you don't know, sir? Christ, you've had a whole bogie wheel shot off. Any other sort of tank you wouldn't have gone ten yards."

I remembered the crack and shudder on the escarpment, saw again the puff of smoke and felt that invisible thing rushing past me through the air. I gave the side of the Honey a little pat and settled down into the blankets to get as much sleep as the clanging mechanics would allow me. They worked hard right through the night, but the job could not be done in time, and before first light we had to change equipment, food, bedding and crew with another tank. It was something I was to get pretty used to.

That evening a war correspondent called Randolph Churchill, gleaning colourful items for his readers, sent a message back to Cairo that "Bob Crisp, the South African fast bowler, had got the first hat-trick of the Crusader campaign by knocking out three enemy tanks with three shots."

It was duly pinned up on the notice board at the Gezira Club. It was only a slight exaggeration.

In another part of the desert that night, men of the German Reconnaissance Unit 3 were recording in their diary an attack by the enemy: "He had very fast tanks, and the Unit had to get away at full speed under continuous fire. The enemy forced the Unit farther north over the Trigh Capuzzo and the first escarpment and then withdrew south-east."

Nobody else believed my story that I had looked down into Bardia that afternoon.

THIRD DAY

Up to now everything had gone more or less according to plan, and the British armour was where it was intended to be. There was only one thing wrong. The Germans had not reacted; we just had not had that big slogging match that was supposed to happen with the panzer divisions. And sneaking through the battalions on our side were disturbing stories that the Honeys and Crusaders were no match at all for the Mark IIIs and Mark IVs in equal combat. It was a simple proposition: our little cannons could not

knock them out, and they could knock us out easily. The word "eighty-eight" was invading the tank-crew vocabulary as a symbol of shattering mutilation. Within the week we were reckoning that it needed three Honeys to destroy one Mark IV, and during that entire campaign we were to find no effective answer to the enemy's use of anti-tank weapons well forward with his panzers. It was a technique that very nearly won him the battle—and many subsequent desert battles in the years to come.

Nobody had time even to make a brew in the morning; as soon as it got light enough to see, shells started falling among us from goodness knows where. Unseen shellfire can be very disconcerting and there is none of the psychological relief of retaliation. We had no sooner got dispersed when tanks were reported, attacking the battalion's right flank. We took up hull down positions to meet this threat, but within half an hour they were reported attacking our left flank. This threat proved equally nebulous, and for 2 hours we sat gazing into space and sand. Away in the distance I spotted a column of vehicles replenishing with petrol, but could not be sure which side they belonged to. Neither could anybody else.

The next alarm came over the air at noon, in the form of a warning to expect a heavy attack from the north where tanks and transport were massing. We were reassured by the information that the Royal Air Force was about to bomb this concentration. There had been plenty of air activity all morning; the first we had seen. The bombers never appeared where we could see them, but the message was good for morale.

By this time most of us were developing a sort of wolf-wolf complex, but we were startled into reality by a frantic call for help from "B" squadron, who screamed that they were being attacked by over 100 tanks. The desert air was suddenly full of high explosive and the terrifying swish of armour-piercing shells. Coming in from the west very fast, with the sun behind them shining straight into our gunners' eyes, were scores of the dark, ominous shapes of German panzers. Going even faster a few hundred yards ahead of them were "B" Squadron's Honeys, together with half a dozen soft-skinned vehicles.

They came hurtling back through "A" Squadron, whose commander started yelling into his microphone: "Halt! Halt! the lot of you. Turn round and fight, you yellow bastards. I'll shoot the next tank I see moving back."

As that rush came abreast of me and the firing began to get personal, it was desperately hard not to turn round and join in it. I decided not to. At the same time I didn't particularly want to die at that moment. Movement was the obvious answer, but movement in a direction which could not be described as running away. I could see the panzers clearly now, coming down a broad depression in line abreast, 40 to 60 of them, easy enough to exaggerate into a hundred and more. On my left was a low ridge, the southern edge of the depression, and I made for this flat out with my troop conforming, in the hope of getting on the flank of the advancing juggernauts and getting out of the direct line of fire.

Once over the ridge I turned back along the crest to see what was happening, and whether it would be possible to do any damage. The enemy onslaught was losing some of its impetus, owing to lack of opposition, and with darkness falling fast the Germans could not have claimed a great deal of success—although it must have given them a good deal of self-satisfaction. I noticed that two other Honeys had joined my troop, and I led them in a wary circle to try and come up behind some of the flank Mark IVs.

Dimly in the dusk I saw the outlines of a couple of armoured cars, perched on the edge of the depression with both guns firing away to the east. I could not tell in that light whether they were British or German. It was a pity to miss such a nice opportunity to bag a couple of Jerry 6-wheelers, if they were Jerry, so I decided to make a quick dash up to them to get a positive identification. If they turned out to be enemy I could quickly let my other tanks know, and they could knock them out.

I made a hand-signal to the troop sergeant to wait where he was, and ordered my driver to speed up. No concealment was possible now, but I hoped to get up close enough before being seen. I got to within 30 yards of those two cars before I could be sure of the black cross painted on the turret. Then I told the driver "Left about", and swung round in a great plume of sand and dust while I picked up the mike to tell my troop to open fire.

Too late I saw that my hand signal had been either unseen or misinterpreted. 5 Honeys were pursuing me hell-bent in the gloom, one of them hurtling straight down on me. I could not warn my driver in time, but managed to divert him enough to avoid a broad-side-on collision. There was a rendering crash, and I found myself inextricably locked with the driving sprocket and tracks of the

oncoming Honey. Out of the turret popped the ferocious face of the "A" Squadron commander.

The two armoured cars, clearly disturbed by this unusual display just behind them, disappeared rapidly into the night. We disentangled ourselves but my driving sprocket was hopelessly bent and my Honey had to get towed into leaguer. It was a considerably depleted and dispirited battalion that herded together that evening. What we wanted most of all was information. What the hell was happening everywhere? Was this just the outside edge of a major battle? Who was winning?

There were no replies.

One of the operators got the B.B.C. 9 o'clock news, and we gathered round to hear the familiar, well-modulated voice saying: "The Eighth Army with about 75,000 men excellently armed and equipped, has started a general offensive in the Western Desert with the aim of destroying the German-Italian forces in Africa."

We were not the only troops listening to the 9 o'clock news that night. The German monitors heard it, too. It was the vital piece of information that Rommel was lacking. The advance of Eighth Army into Libya had been so well concealed from the enemy that until they heard the B.B.C. announcement they were wholly unaware that this was a major offensive. Indeed, until the last moment Rommel persisted in his view that the British were not capable of mounting a full-scale attack at that time.

The B.B.C. announcer really started something. Rommel, unaware that anything more than a reconnaissance-in-force had been projected, did not react in the way anticipated by our planners, and during the two days in which he had been expected to give battle to our concentrated forces he had simply sat comparatively quiet trying to get information. In these two days the Eighth Army Commander, anxious to provoke some sort of decisive action and disturbed at his own inability to exert any influence on the situation, sent his three armoured brigades probing offensively across Rommel's supply lines and towards the rear of the enemy forces investing Tobruk. It broke up the armoured concentration at a decisive time, and split it into three separate parts, each part inferior to the opposing tank force and unable to give quick assistance to each other.

Operation Crusader and the war in the Middle East was very nearly lost simply by Rommel's disbelief and inaction in those first two days. Now things were to start happening. The nights were no

longer dark and silent. Our own leaguers remained tombs of rest and replenishment but the Germans, seeking protection in visibility, adopted exactly the opposite night-time tactics and lit the desert all round their leaguers with brilliant white and green flares and Very lights fired continuously by their outlying pickets. It was a convenient arrangement, and it was just as well that at least one side knew where the other was during the hours of darkness.

That night I got orders to take my troop out before first light to patrol the area ahead of the battalion, which was to move due north at dawn.

FOURTH DAY

In the cold dark of the pre-dawn my troop moved out of leaguer, hungry, sleepy, dirty, unenthusiastic. I munched miserably at a hard biscuit plastered with marmalade passed up to me from inside the turret where the crew were having their breakfast. The tanks edged forward slowly. In each vehicle the scene would be the same . . . the driver, hands at the ready on the steering sticks and foot poised sensitively on the throttle, would be peering intently at the narrow world confined by the slit in the armour-plating in front of him; the operator would be fiddling about with the wireless set and checking the ammunition and the A.P. shells for the 37-mm.; the gunner would be settling himself comfortably, testing the traverse and the ammunition belts, squinting through his telescopic sights at the rounded O of desert beyond; each tank commander, standing upright in the turret or perched on top with legs dangling inside, would be pushing his vision to the utmost distance to pick up shape or movement, the constant earphones in position and the mike on his chest to maintain his link with the rest of the regiment and with his crew below.

The light stole softly across the desert from the east, and as it drifted ahead it suddenly lit up a dense column of transport moving at a good pace across our front to the north-west. We must have spotted each other simultaneously, as the head of the column suddenly wheeled sharply to the west and made off fast enough to prevent us getting any guns into action.

A brisk battle developed over on the extreme right, and in mid-morning "C" squadron was moved across to reinforce the other

squadrons which were under pressure. On the way past H.Q. I had a quick word with Doctor Macmillan, our M.O., who told me that Peter Williams had been killed. Peter had been second in command of "B" Squadron, and had got an M.C. at Calais in the evacuation of France. He was the first officer fatality in 3R.T.R., and somehow his death subtly altered the outlook for everybody. A few minutes later I passed Williams' tank where it had been knocked out, and realized with a shock that although it was facing north towards the enemy, the shell which had knocked out the tank and which had killed him had penetrated the back of the turret.

I wondered how many people in the war had been and would be killed by their own sides' bullets, shells and bombs. Identification in the confused, swift-moving desert war was always difficult, and was made more so by encounters that took place so often in the indeterminate light of dawn or dusk and by the paucity of information available about the movements of either force.

It was a confused day of constant skirmishing with enemy forces which seemed to occupy all the desert to the north. I had several duels with enemy tanks, knocked out two and learnt a great deal. I learnt which of their armoured fighting vehicles I could take on and beat with the Honey, and which of them I had to avoid until I could create a favourable situation for myself. We were always prepared to take on any number of Italian tanks, for instance, and any of the German Mark IIs and armoured cars. The Marks III and IV, however, had to be dealt with by subterfuge and the grace of God rather than by superior fighting qualities.

It was on this occasion that I actually saw two A.P. shells coming towards me before they hit my tank. I had picked out a couple of Mark II tanks that had swanned out from the main convoy, as was their habit under threat of attack, and I was making my way towards them using the ground as well as I could to get within the 600 yards that I had already decided was the absolute maximum effective range of the 37-mm. They could see me, of course, and knew what I was up to. Suddenly I saw the puff of smoke from one of them, and in the same split second I glimpsed a black object whishing through the air at me. It was followed immediately by another shot from the second tank, and exactly the same thing happened. I watched both shells pitch into the sand about ten yards in front of the tank and ricochet on to the armour with a devil of a clang. It was an invaluable lesson to me. I had noticed

the quick curvature of the shells, and knew that at that distance, not above 1,000 yards, the Mark IIs could do me no damage. More important, I knew that in those German tanks were some very windy soldiers—much more windy than I was.

That day, I believe, we shed our light-heartedness and eagerness. The sense of adventure had gone out of our lives, to be replaced by grimness and fear and a perpetual, mounting weariness of body and spirit.

In the evening we were ordered to take up positions for an attack in force on another big enemy column that could be seen moving to the north-west. Tired and a little unwilling, we waited for the command that would set us off. The light failed before it came. Instead, we pulled back into leaguer in the darkness and counted the rising toll of battle.

The events of that day and the change in the course of the whole campaign had been determined the previous night by Rommel, who had issued orders to his two panzer divisions—15th and 21st—to get together and “attack and destroy the enemy force which has advanced on Tobruk”.

“The objective,” added Rommel’s order, “is the centre airfield at Sidi Rezegh.”

FIFTH DAY

IN the middle of the night the troop leaders were dragged out of their sleep to go to the C.O.’s tank, where, under a carefully shaded torch, we were shown the plans for an attack with the Royal Horse Artillery battery on an enemy leaguer at dawn. We went back to our hard beds muttering and grumbling. I had always favoured a full-scale night attack on a German leaguer, for the simple reason that I couldn’t think of anything worse happening to us, but I didn’t particularly want to get mixed up in this one. I was too damn sleepy, for a start.

At four o’clock we were up and moving into the night, and within half an hour all the lightly-armoured towing vehicles of the R.H.A., known as quads, had got bogged down in a swamp which had survived from the last heavy rains. By the time we reached the scene of the intended assault all that was left of the enemy leaguer were the track marks in the sand.

To compensate for this disappointment, we carried out a vicious

little assault on a cluster of enemy vehicles, all of which proved to be derelict. This was a not altogether unusual occurrence. Movement from leaguer started, of necessity, with visibility at a minimum, and practically anything could happen in the first hour before the sun lit up the desert. The same sort of thing happened in the last hour of light. In between these dim-lit hours the nature of the terrain and atmosphere gave rise to all kinds of queer distortions, so that bushes looked like tanks and tanks looked like rows of trees; and a herd of camels, grazing peacefully in the distance, could fill the air with urgent signals about enemy tank concentrations—signals which could go from troop to regiment to brigade, the resulting flap penetrating right back to Army Headquarters. My own tank must have covered many scores of miles literally in pursuit of mirages.

It was an inauspicious start to the day, and it maintained its character throughout the morning, when we set off on three separate "swans" which turned out to be wild-goose chases. Time was so full of purposeless movement that we were unable even to make a brew.

At 1.30 in the afternoon an order was given for the whole regiment to move on a bearing of 283 degrees, "C" Squadron leading. That meant me, and I was wondering how long it would be before the orders were cancelled and replaced by another bearing, when I heard the C.O. say: "Friends like us are being heavily attacked. They need our help. We must move quickly."

At this stage of the fighting so many tanks had broken down or been knocked out that no squadron was at full strength, and troop organization was on a very make-shift basis. My own troop consisted of only two Honeys, and I had an officer, Tom Eynon, in the other tank acting as troop sergeant. I lined my tank on 283 degrees, and the two of us set off at a good pace into the empty desert westwards.

We were soon miles ahead of the rest of the battalion, and I was beginning to think that this was just another false alarm when ahead of me I saw the tell-tale columns of black smoke, like treacle rising, on the horizon. Behind me as I looked back I could see the moving dots of the other tanks, and behind them, I knew, were the two other tank regiments of 4th Armoured Brigade, mustering about 100 all told instead of the full quota of 160.

Through the wireless I got in touch with the C.O., who sounded faint and distant, to try and get information about where exactly

we were going and what I could expect to find when I got there. He could tell me nothing beyond the compass bearing. I decided not to wait for reinforcements to come up, but to press on as fast as possible and get some real information that would be of value to the commanders behind me. I looked over at Tom, who had heard the conversation, and who made a despairing gesture with both hands out of the top of the turret. I gave my driver the order to advance, and told the crew to get ready for practically anything. The compass was no longer necessary with that grim beacon to guide us.

Operation Crusader was now approaching its dreadful and fateful climax. That bearing of 283 degrees was not just a line drawn across the desert floor. It was pointed straight at the airfield of Sidi Rezegh.

The position, briefly, on that Saturday morning was that light British forces—infantry, guns and tanks of 7th Armoured Brigade and Support Group—were in occupation of the airfield and a good portion of the escarpments which flanked it north and south. Their objective was to link up with the sortie from Tobruk which had already started. 22nd Armoured Brigade were still to the south, and 4th Armoured were as I have just described them. The German armoured divisions had started their advance from the south-east, to carry out Rommel's instructions "to destroy the enemy forces at Sidi Rezegh".

I altered course slightly north, so that my tank was pointing straight at the tall columns of doom. Towards the west there were some lonely-looking vehicles perched on the rim of the horizon, and soon, as we sped on, I could pick out long lines and clusters of transport scattered all over the desert to my left. But there was nothing to prepare me for the astonishing sight that greeted me as, quite suddenly, I came on to the edge of a long escarpment which dipped down under the very tracks of my tank. 30 yards away on my right I saw Tom's Honey come to a quick halt, and then his voice came incredulous over the air: "Jesus Christ, Bob! what the hell is all this?"

Straight ahead and below, in the middle distance, lay the square, clean pattern of a desert airfield, its boundaries marked by neat lines of wrecked German and Italian fighter planes, its centre littered with limp and shattered tanks from some of which the smoke was rising black into the blue sky. On my left the desert stretched away covered with thin-skinned vehicles, but strangely

empty of human movement. On my right, and between our two tanks and the landing ground, the slope and bottom of the escarpment was crawling with the dark figures of men digging slit trenches, putting down mines, clustered around anti-tank and field guns or, unbelievably, cooking a meal. On the other side of the depression the opposite escarpment was full of men, less active than those below, and every now and again I saw the flash of gunfire.

Neither Tom nor I could tell whether any of the men, vehicles or guns were enemy or friendly. The only positive identification we had were the tanks on the airfield . . . all the burning ones were British Crusaders. There was no sign at all behind me of the rest of the battalion, but I just managed to raise the C.O., very faint and faraway. I told him roughly where I was, and described the fantastic scene below me. "I don't know whether they are enemy or friends," I ended. "Can you tell me what is supposed to be here?"

He told me to wait while he consulted Brigade. In a minute or two, back came his surprising reply: "Treat anything you see as enemy."

I was looking across at Tom as the C.O. spoke, and even at 30 yards I could see the reaction of amazement on his face as he heard the message. We were perched on the edge of the escarpment in full view of the massed forces about 600 yards below. I could see them looking at us, but nobody paid much attention. I had come to the conclusion that they must be our own troops, but I could not be positive, and that last bit of information didn't help much. I was quite certain that the people on the other escarpment were enemy, and I was actually able to watch the gunfire and the burst of the shells in the depression below me. Whatever it was, it was a situation that did not seem possible in a battle.

I was nearly going crazy in trying to identify something and trying to determine where the enemy began and ended, and all the time asking the C.O. for information which he could not give me. I told Tom that I was quite sure that the infantry dug in about 2,000 yards away to the north were Jerry and that I was going to engage them with the machine gun. I had already given the gunner the order: "Browning, traverse right. On, two thousand. Enemy infantry . . ." when I heard somebody shouting and banging on the side of the tank. I looked down at a little open tourer that had pulled up alongside and found myself staring at the three pips and

crown of a tall, lean brigadier who was standing up on the front seat. I took the ear phones off to hear him ask: "Are you in command here?"

I looked again at his shoulder just to make sure, and said: "I'm in command of this troop, sir."

"What unit are you with?"

"Third R.T.R., 4th Armoured Brigade."

"Good. There's a Jerry tank attack coming in from the west. We need you. Follow me."

I said desperately: "Sir, if you wait ten minutes the whole brigade will be up."

"If you're there in ten minutes you'll be in time. If you're there in fifteen you'll be too late," said the long brigadier. "Follow me."

He sat down, said something to the fair-haired driver sitting capless beside him, and shot off down the escarpment. I told my driver to follow the car, and we bounced down. Over my shoulder I could see Tom's tank lurching down behind. On the way I explained as well as I could what had happened to my C.O.—that at that moment I was hurtling towards an airfield on which there were a lot of knocked-out tanks, and that if he got there in 10 minutes he'd be in time and if he got there in 15 minutes he'd be too late. I said that as near as I could judge I was just east of Point 176 on the map, and that anything he saw between him and the airfield was friendly. I could do no more, and was very relieved to hear the distant acknowledgment.

By this time we were down the slope and in amongst the infantry and gunners. They were our own all right; the grimy, weary men looked up hopefully as we passed, and I could see them yelling and giving big "Thumbs-up" signs. We went through and beyond them in a cloud of dust. 20, 25, 30 miles an hour until the bounding tank, bucking the ridges and bushes and trenches, stretched out on the sudden smoothness of the landing ground with its crumpled planes.

30 yards ahead of me raced the little car, the blonde head of the driver gleaming like the plumed helm of Navarre. Beside the driver sat the brigadier holding aloft a blue and white flag that stood straight out in the gale of their going. No wonder the dispirited troops cheered. It must have been quite a sight.

Straight across the airfield we hurtled, towards the dipping sun. I hadn't the faintest idea where we were going, nor why. I

was following three pips and a crown and a stiff, blue and white flag. Now we were amongst the still-burning, depressing-looking Crusaders, and left them behind to speed through a few knocked-out Jerry tanks—a much pleasanter sight. Then we were through these on to the clean desert floor.

Suddenly the shells rained down and the flat surface was transformed into fountains of red and yellow earth and flying stones and lead through which the little car weaved and dodged and sometimes disappeared altogether in cascades of evil-smelling dirt and smoke. Miraculously it tore on and the arm that held the lofted flag never wavered.

At last, on the opposite edge of the airfield, where the scrub grew again in a straight line, the car halted and my driver pulled back on the brakes. The long brigadier stood up, looked back at me, then waved his arm widely to the westward. In the same gesture the car revved up, doubled back and like a coursing hare disappeared erratically through the shell bursts.

I looked ahead to where the brigadier had swung his arm. My stomach turned over. 1,200 yards ahead of me, stretched the array of dark brown shapes, 60 or 70 monsters in a solid line abreast coming steadily towards the landing ground . . . towards me. The vicious flashes at the end of their gun muzzles stood out in fearful contrast against their sombre camouflage. Behind them the sky was red with blood. I didn't need binoculars to pick out Mark IIIs and IVs. In between moved the infantrymen, and I caught the crackle of machine-gun fire.

I picked up the mike to speak to the gunner: "Cannon. Twelve hundred. You see all those things coming towards you. They're Jerry tanks. Pick out one and stay on it till you knock it out. Get cracking." I heard the first shot go off almost immediately, and watched the tracer sail in a long shallow curve. It hit on one of those dark silhouettes, and bounced high into the air. We were much too far out of range to do any great damage, but I had to do something, and we were well within their range. I kept my gun going more in hope than expectation. Anyway, it was good for morale. We couldn't just sit there.

My own feeling of nakedness and exposure was complete. There wasn't a bush more than two feet high anywhere to provide even the illusion of concealment. I looked round wildly for any kind of undulation that would give me even an imaginary protection, but the only unevenness on all that level plane was the churned-up

sand of earlier tank tracks. In the event it was probably my immobility which saved me.

Over on my right I suddenly saw Tom's Honey coming flat out across the landing ground. He came up almost abreast of me, and was about 100 yards off when suddenly, still at top speed, his tank gave a great swerve and, slewing up sand as a speedboat splashes water, wheeled completely round and vanished somewhere among the derelict tanks.

It was those knocked-out tanks which, I believe, saved me. The German tank gunners could not have been able to distinguish whether they were derelict or in action, and it is very unlikely that they would have expected to be confronted with one, solitary Honey. I looked quickly over my shoulder expecting to see the depression full of the charging, pennanted tanks of the whole 4th Armoured Brigade. My spirits dropped when I realized that on that whole vast airfield not a thing was moving.

The red fountains were playing all round me now; my mouth was filled with the acrid taste of cordite, and my nose could sense that frightful smell of impending death that goes with it. The air was full of lead and noise, and the tanks crept towards me with their guns belching. Mingled with the detonations of the H.E. and my own cannon I could hear that terrifying swish of armour-piercing shell, and sometimes get a split-second glimpse of a tracer going by, taking the breath out of my lungs with the vacuum of its passage. Every now and again my Honey would give that quick lurch which meant a hit.

I heard my gunner yell "I've got one, sir," and it sounded good to hear his elation and to see the slow smoke curling up from the Mark III and the men bale out. The gunner was all right. He was picking his targets with an occasional word from me as I watched the tracer searing towards its target: "Keep on that big bastard that you've just hit until you stop him." The loader was all right, too. He would be too busy to be scared . . . tugging the next shell out of its bracket, pulling down the ejection lever, whipping in a new shell with enough force to close the breech, bending under to tap the gunner in the "gun ready" signal, and then starting all over again as he heard the shot and saw the recoil next to his face. Any way, he couldn't see what I could see and the gunner could only see a small part of it. The driver was the chap I felt sorry for. He would be squeezed back and to one side, getting as far away from his driving aperture as possible, inactive and frightened to death.

staring at that advancing line of tanks with an awful fascination, wondering when the shell would strike that would carve his body into little pieces, sensing the still-running engine through his feet and hands.

I noticed the engine, too, the sweet music of the radial in between all the other sounds and the little rocking movements that were sometimes a strike and sometimes the recoil of my own cannon. I was still on the air to my C.O.: "Hullo JAGO, JAGO one calling. Seventy enemy tanks approaching western edge of airfield. Am engaging at a thousand yards. JAGO one to JAGO, over."

I was blurting my message into the frantic signals which were jamming the regimental frequency, hoping that somebody would hear me. I never got an acknowledgment.

The arbitrary business we make of time crumbles into nothingness or infinity on occasions like that. I have no means of knowing how long we were on the edge of the airfield of Sidi Rezegh . . . 5 minutes, 20 minutes? Whatever it was, there came a time when it was long enough. I had a last despairing search behind me for some sign of rescue and support, and then I decided to go. The line of tanks ahead of me was only about 800 yards away, but I could see the shellbursts where our own 25-pounders were beginning to go into action. The line seemed to be slowing down a bit as though it did not know quite what to do, and was awaiting some decisive order. It seemed the psychological moment to make my departure. I said as quietly as I could into the mike: "Gunner, cease fire. Driver, advance . . . turn about . . . go like hell."

That "driver-advance" was the critical moment. It was always the same after a slugging match with the enemy; that frantic second of time when you did not know whether the tank would move or not. Even if the engine is still running, the suspension may be blasted into a state of collapse; either of the tracks may be lying on the sand in mangled pieces; any of those sickening lurches might have meant the end of your last hope—mobility.

On the edge of the landing ground I held my breath and felt the tank heave as the gears engaged. Then the engine seemed to rev high with relief, and the tank moved forward. This was another critical period. As soon as the tank moved, I knew that the eyes of every gunner in those panzers would be attracted to me. If the engine stalled now I had had it. In fact, there was a good chance

of that whatever happened, but I was quite sure that once I could get up speed I would be able to get away.

We got round the turn-about without disaster, and soon we were speeding back across the airfield, jinking left and right, creating our own smoke-screen of dust, dodging into the smoke of the shell bursts, all of which, as I had anticipated, now seemed to be aimed at me personally. "Driver right, steady. Driver left, steady. Driver right . . . steady." So we fled back running that incredible gauntlet of death, each second beckoning us to safety. When we reached the lee of the derelict tanks we were more or less safe from A.P. shells, and I knew we had made it.

Half-way back across the landing ground I felt safe enough to slow down and consider the situation. There was still a battle to be fought, and I did not want to fight it alone. The rest of the brigade must be somewhere. I halted the tank while I surveyed the scene through my binoculars. Behind me the panzers appeared to have come to an uncertain stop some hundreds of yards from the airfield. The sun was disappearing over the high ground to the west, and there would not be more than half an hour's fighting light left of the day. Feeling more reassured, I turned my attention to the south-east, from where I expected to see the Honeys of 3R.T.R. streaming down the escarpment. All I could see was a vast and swirling cloud of dust, and going round and round inside it in circles and figures-of-eight I could dimly pick out the familiar shapes of British tanks. The battalion frequency was a bedlam of orders and counter-orders and frantic calls for information. For a few precious seconds I managed to get the C.O. on the air, and heard him order everybody else to shut-up "so that I can talk to Bob".

I didn't go into details. But told him that there were about 70 Jerry tanks approaching the airfield from the west. He should get all tanks lined up on the eastern edge of the landing ground facing west. He would find me there. His reply was very much to the point. From somewhere, in the middle of the tank-manufactured dust-storm he said: "I don't know my arse from my elbow, let alone east from west." But I heard him pass the instructions on to the squadrons telling them to line up on my tank.

I saw several tanks come out of the dust, and mill about blindly. Two of them fell into an anti-tank ditch, and through my glasses I could see one lying on its side with the upper track whirling madly. It was a hopeless shambles, and after a depressing few

minutes I heard the C.O. order all tanks to rally on top of the escarpment.

I can't say that I wasn't very relieved at this development. The panzers were on the move again, looking even more monstrous in the reflected red of the sky as they surged slowly towards the landing ground and the southern escarpment. Our Honey was coming under direct fire again, so we wasted no time in obeying the latest order.

But something was wrong. The tank was behaving in a very peculiar manner. Then I smelt the smoke. Quickly I looked down into the turret. The white, questioning faces of the gunner and operator stared back at me, and their lips formed the word "Fire".

I looked back at the engine and saw the ominous fumes pouring out of the louvres. Just then the Honey stopped. I yelled at the crew to bale out, and as we jumped down on to the sand we grabbed what we could off the hot armour-plating above the engine—bedding, grub, water bottles, cooking utensils. We ran back through the shell-bursts and straggled wearily through the confusion and the gathering night up the side of the escarpment.

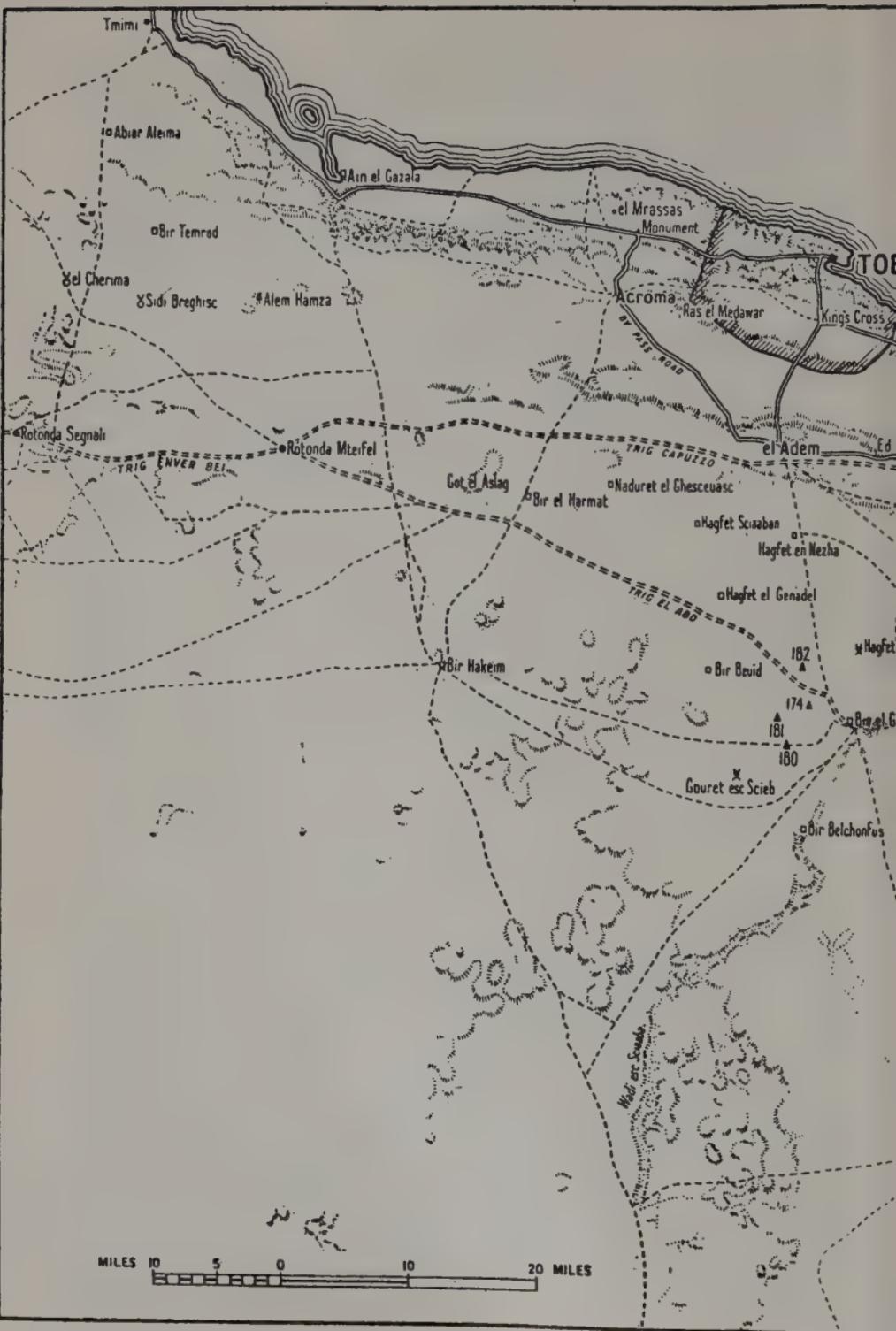
The first person I saw was Harry Maegraith. He also was climbing the escarpment with his crew; it was his tank which I had seen toppling sideways into the ditch. I pointed back to the airfield where a fresh, dense column of smoke was rising high above the others.

"There's our Honey," I said, and told him quickly what had happened. "But what the hell happened to everybody?"

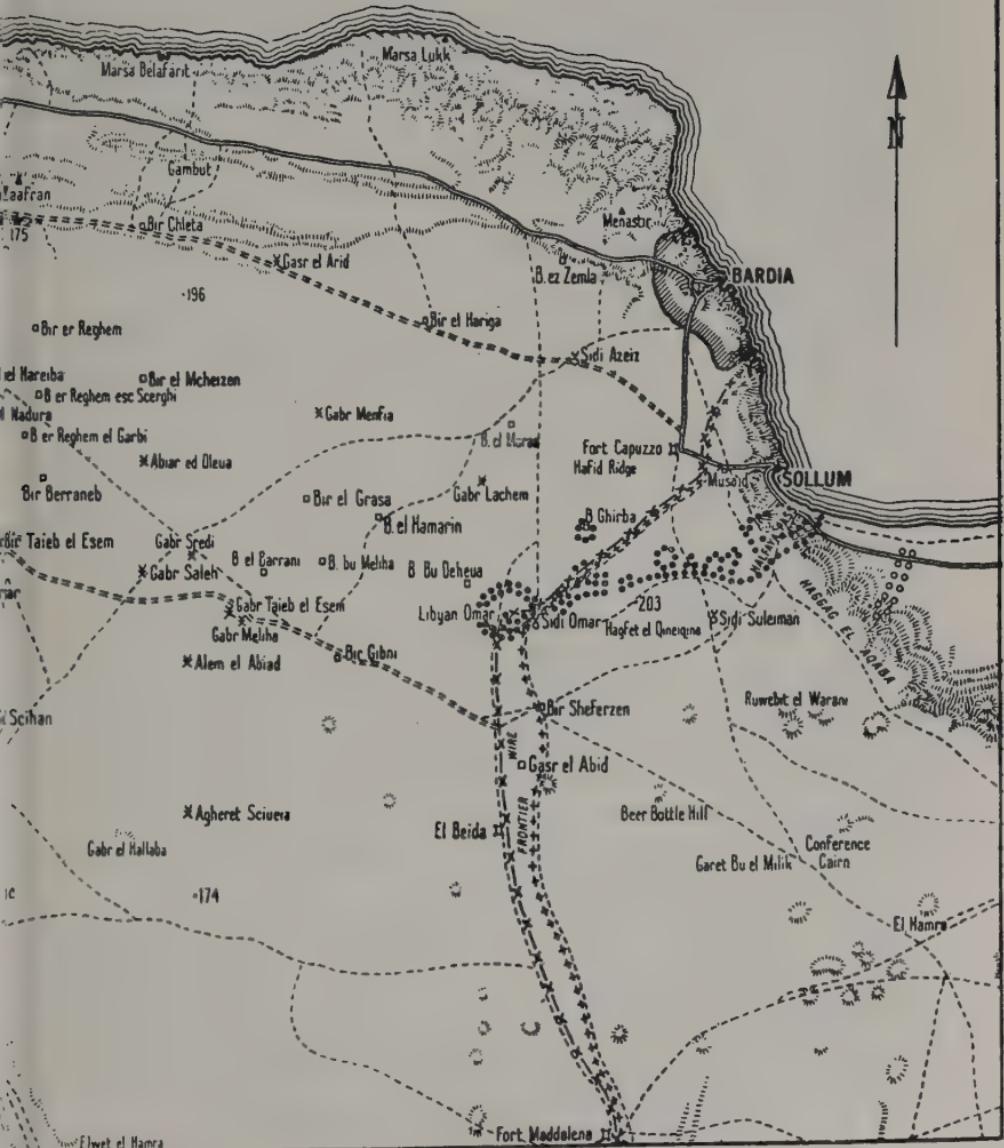
"You've never seen such a balls-up. We got to the edge of the escarpment all right, and then nobody knew where to go or what to do. We were told to advance on to the airfield and to line up on you facing west. Then Fifth Tanks got mixed up with us, and between us we kicked up such a hell of a lot of dust that we couldn't see ten yards in any direction. We just went round and round each other in circles. I don't think any of our tanks went into action."

Talking and panting, we reached the top of the escarpment, and soon we picked up a little cluster of Honeys with their yellow pennants fluttering idly in the dirt-filled air. To our relief we recognized our C.O. perched on the turret, earphones on and mike pressed to his lips. When he saw us walking up, he handed over to his operator and jumped down.

"Am I glad to see you," he said. "The whole blasted battalion's disappeared. We've got my own tank and these three others—



"CRUSADER" BATTLEGROUND



Map Reproduced by Permission of the Oxford University Press, Cape Town.

that's the lot. I've got some of them on the air, but they haven't the faintest idea where they are or where we are. What happened to you two?"

His eyes grew wide with astonishment as he listened to my sketchy story. I was telling him about Tom Eynon, and asking whether Tom had contacted him, when a Honey drew up alongside us and from it clambered the familiar, black-overalled figure of Brigadier Gatehouse. He told us quite calmly that his headquarters had been overrun by a Jerry tank column, and that he wanted some tanks to go with him and get it back. I have never been more grateful to have been knocked out. Nothing could shake Alec Gatehouse out of that rock-like imperturbability. He showed no surprise when he was told that Third Tanks could muster only four Honeys.

"Then I'll go and get some of Dinham Drew's lot," he said, and drove off to 5R.T.R. somewhere east of us along the top of the escarpment. He collected about a dozen Honeys, formed them up in a solid, triangular armoured phalanx and moved off into the desert night. They had a wild Guy Fawkes encounter with an enemy column, but did not get back the brigade H.Q.

The sun was down behind the rugged western escarpment, and the smoke and dust of war were mingling with the darkness, as we strained our eyes into the depression to try and see what was happening. I was quite sure that any minute the squat shapes of panzers would come rumbling through the gloom, but we could see no movement except for the silhouettes of a party of stretcher bearers walking along the rim of the escarpment to the west, steel-helmeted but incredibly unconcerned. Machine-gun bullets were zipping everywhere through the low scrub, and I used the last of the light to study these courageous men through my binoculars. With the exception of the Medical Officer, who was leading them, they were all coloured.

"Good God," I said to myself. "Cape coloured! That must be the South African brigade over there."

And I saw again that long line of tanks sweeping up from the sunset, and wondered what would happen to the infantry men crouched in their shallow, rocky slit-trenches when the panzers rolled over them. I turned to my C.O.: "Jesus, sir, that brigadier will get a bloody V.C. for today's performance, but I wish to hell he had waited ten minutes."

He got his V.C.; it was Brigadier Jock Campbell.

That night we leaguered where we were, each man sitting in his apportioned place inside the turret. I wondered what the hell had happened to Tom Eynon. I didn't think about tomorrow at all.

Some years later, penned up in England awaiting the invasion of Normandy, I whiled away the time by writing an account of these incredible hours for a Sunday newspaper. My then commanding officer read it in the Mess, asked me if it was true and pointed out that it was very convenient that the only person who could corroborate it, Jock Campbell, was dead. I had come to the conclusion some time before that it was practically impossible for a junior officer to kick a Colonel in the backside and get away with it, especially in an Officers' Mess, so I said nothing.

A few days later a letter arrived for me and, looking quickly at the signature, I was elated to see it was from Tom Eynon. I invited him to come and spend a few days with us and went to meet him at Ipswich Station. He came out of the train on crutches and one leg.

Back in the Mess he told me his story. He had seen the little staff car alongside me, and heard my information going back to the C.O., but couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the car tearing off down the escarpment with my tank just behind it. He got a late start, but was soon pursuing the pair of us towards the airfield several hundred yards behind and going flat out. He saw my Honey stop and then the car came jinking back through the shell-bursts. He was still wondering what it was all about when he spotted the long line of Jerry tanks coming towards the landing ground.

"I was just going to give the driver the order to slow down to pull up in line with you," Tom told me, "when my Honey suddenly swung completely round, still going flat out, and we went back across the airfield lurching crazily from side to side. I thought my driver had gone mad, and was yelling at him through the mike when I felt the operator pulling hard on my leg. He shouted up at me that the driver had been hit."

Just after this the tank had come to a halt of its own accord, and they had all clambered out. Shells had been bursting all over the airfield, and the air had been whistling with bullets. Tom had gone round to the front of the tank to try and get the driver out through the hatch. He had propped open the thick steel flap, and had reached in with both hands to grip the man under the armpits. The driver had been dead or unconscious, and as Tom had leaned back to heave he had felt the gears engage suddenly, so that the Honey lurched forward, bundling Tom over backwards and passing right

over him. What had happened, he reckoned, was that the shell had penetrated the front of the tank and killed the driver, whose foot had depressed the clutch pedal and stayed on it until Tom had tried to pull him out. Then his foot had moved, the clutch pedal had sprung out, engaging the gears, and the tank had started forward.

"When I came out from under that Honey," said Tom, "I didn't know what the hell had happened for a few seconds. I saw the tank disappearing with my crew hanging on to the side and a corpse in the driver's seat. Then I realised my one leg had been more or less snapped off at the hip. That night the Jerries picked me up and sent me to one of their hospitals."

After nearly three years in hospitals and P.O.W. camps, Eynon had been released, under an exchange-of-prisoners scheme, shortly before reading my article. I let him repeat his story to the C.O., without comment.

There was other confirmation, of a sort, at the war's end. Writing of the afternoon's events in the Royal Artillery Commemoration Book, Brigadier Hely described the withdrawal from gun positions on the edge of the airfield: "The advancing German infantry were almost on them. Firing at point blank range, with apparently no hope of survival, these indomitable men still fought their guns. Suddenly a troop of British light tanks roared out of the gathering gloom, charged straight into the German infantry and, firing with every weapon they had, halted the enemy attack long enough for the gunners to hook-in and pull out."

It is surprising how radically a slightly different angle can alter the view! Another example of altered perspective is recorded in the Rifle Brigade's account of the proceedings. After referring to the synthetic dust storm caused by charging tanks and bursting shells, the writer describes how Brigadier Campbell came up to a regiment of the 4th Armoured Brigade, dashed along the line of tanks hammering on their steel sides, explained the urgency of the situation and led them into battle "in a sort of cavalry charge waving a red flag".

I am not the least surprised that on that confused and bloody battlefield the brigadier's blue and white flag seemed red, or that two Honeys could look like a regiment.

One other thing about that Sidi Rezegh evening that always puzzled me has been cleared up subsequently by German war diaries. When I last saw that mass of panzers and infantry, they had

nearly reached the edge of the airfield. I could never understand why, during the night or at dawn the next day, the whole depression and the escarpments to north and south of it were not overrun and occupied by the enemy. I knew only too well that there was practically nothing to stop their progress across the landing ground except the empty hulks of tanks and the immobile dead. What had stopped them? The explanation from the German side was a simple one—they had run out of petrol and ammunition.

Thus history is made . . . and written. On the following morning the newspapers of Britain and the Commonwealth had headlined with rejoicing type General Sir Thomas Blamey's comment: "Britain has won the tank battle in Libya".

Many times in the years that have passed I have tried to recapture my personal emotions through the events of that hectic afternoon. At the beginning it is always the same with me. A turmoil in the stomach, which is probably a common experience, giving physical credence to the expression "wind-up". I had had the same feeling many times to a lesser degree waiting for a race to begin or getting ready to bat in a Test match. Then, when the race is begun or the innings started, the fullness of the moment overwhelms the fear of anticipation. It is so in battle. When mind and body are fully occupied, it is surprising how unfrightened you can be. I only remember two moments on the airfield when I felt the shock of fear so strongly that it went to my stomach. There was the first realization of the long row of panzers coming straight towards me, and there was the sudden awareness, when I looked back over my shoulders expecting to see the Honeys roaring out on to the landing ground, that I was utterly and completely alone.

But they were fleeting emotions, soon secondary to the business in hand and the need not to sound afraid to those other three men below me. I had to stay in command, not only of them, but of time and circumstance. I was bewildered by the whole situation, and, as always, filled with an intense curiosity about what was going to happen next. Running through it all, too, was a sense of elation at what we were doing out there on our own, or trying to do. Also, I was bloody annoyed. Annoyed not with the Germans or Italians, but with brigadiers and generals and colonels and all the blasted armoured brigades and regiments that had left me stranded naked on an airfield within a few hundred yards of a panzer division while they mucked about in an immunity of confusion.

That evening I rolled up in borrowed blankets alongside the adjutant's tank and went to sleep, wondering how the hell we four had managed to be still alive.

SIXTH DAY

IN Britain, this Sunday, the last in November, is the end of the Ecclesiastical Year. In the German Church calendar it is known as Totensonntag—the Sunday of the Dead—and thus it was labelled for history by the German Afrika Korps. The appellation would have been a good deal more accurate if applied to a kind of All Souls Day of the South African Dutch Reformed Church.

During the night a few stray Honeys had wandered into our little resting place, and at 5.30 on Sunday morning the total available strength of the 3rd Royal Tank Regiment—all 7 of it—was ordered to move south-west on a bearing of 210 degrees. Where the order came from only the colonel knew, as the desert around us was empty of Honeys. There was no sign of Brigade H.Q., nor of 5R.T.R., nor of 8th Hussars, nor of our own "A" and "B" Squadrons. There was just our battalion headquarters and the remains of two troops of "C" squadron. We knew where some of our tanks were, all right; they were at the bottom of those columns of smoke which still rose black and thick from the depression, invisible over the escarpment a mile to the north-west. Smoke and dust of yesterday's battle still hung in the unmoving air, and unbelievable whistling came from a random truck some 40 yards away whose crew were making breakfast. As we watched, wondering about the day that was now opening about us, the first red rays caught the columnar crests of smoke, dissipating them in wisps of blood. I thought, for no particular reason, that it must have looked like that when the Israelites were led out of Egypt.

As the tank engines warmed up, the dismounted crews clambered up behind the Honeys until such time as contact could be made with our "B" echelon lorries and they could go back and await the arrival of new vehicles. I sat on the back of the adjutant's tank—it was warm on top of the engine—wondering how I could get myself a Honey and trying to work out my movements if we ran into a battle. There was little I could do about anything. No transport was available, and there was no place to go to anyway.

I was damned if I was going to sit on my arse all day watching the battle of Sidi Rezegh from the edge of the escarpment. I didn't think it was going to last very long, at that.

As the sun lifted red and solid out of the desert, we came into what can only be described as a densely-populated area. Hundreds of vehicles—lorries, trucks, staff-cars, ten-tonners, jeeps, wireless vans, command cars, armoured cars—surrounded us on all sides. Peaceful smoke from dozens of breakfast fires hung lazily over the scene. Looking around me in amazement from my perch on the back of the Honey I was delighted to see the orange shoulder flashes of South Africans, and the friendly but anxious black faces of African troops going about their early morning chores.

We had run into the H.Q. area of the 5th South African Brigade somewhere just south-west of Hareifet en Nbeidat. Our covey of tanks pulled up, and I saw the colonel dismount and start talking to one of the senior officers shaving alongside a staff car. I jumped down, and soon found myself among friends, including Ronnie Grieveson, the Transvaal and South African cricketer, who gave me news of other cricketing contemporaries of mine—Bruce Mitchell was one—scattered around the Western Desert. He also supplied us with inevitable and delicious mugs of coffee, and after one look at me invited me to use his wash basin and shaving kit. A grinning African batman brought a can of hot water; it was just like old times on a shooting trip in the veld. I had managed to get my hands wet and soaped when I heard the adjutant calling my name. He beckoned hurriedly from the turret of his Honey, and I noticed that the C.O.'s tank was already on the move. I managed to splash some of that wonderful hot water on my face, and then ran for it, wiping off the mud with a muddier handkerchief. With much grinning and waving and yelling of rude Afrikaans phrases we went on our way through the vehicles and men and paraphernalia.

Above the roar of the engine the adjutant was bellowing the latest griff. We were to continue on our bearing of 210 degrees until we came to a spot called Hagfet el Garbia. I looked at the map propped on my knees, and saw that this was on the track running from El Adem to the Trigh el Abd, about 5 miles south of our present position. When we got there (the adjutant shouted) we were to link up with our Brigade H.Q., which was somewhere in that area. I wondered how on earth Brigade had managed to get

down there, and looked forward to being able to pick up another Honey if there were any left over from the previous night's escapades.

We were crossing a comparatively deserted strip of desert, and I could see the mass of vehicles we had just left slipping down over the horizon behind me. Engrossed in my thoughts and my map-reading I was jerked back to reality by a sudden commotion about the tank. We were engulfed in a mad rush of trucks and lorries scattering over the desert to the north and east, while everywhere soldiers on foot ran for slit-trenches and disappeared incredibly into the sand. I gaped round the corner of the turret, and saw that we had come into another South African leaguer area even vaster and more densely packed with transport of all kinds than the one we had so recently left. Several shell bursts just ahead of us showed part of the reason for the sudden commotion. The adjutant leaned back and yelled into my ear: "You better get off, Bob. Your South African pals are being attacked by tanks, and we've got to go and help them."

I nodded and jumped off, and ran over to where I could see a few officers trying to get things organized. I noticed a few armoured cars and a couple of Honeys lying around, but who they belonged to I could not even guess. I soon discovered that we were in among the 5th Brigade "B" Echelon, the entire outfit, and they were in a fine state of flap with enemy tanks apparently all round them. All of a sudden I saw the unmistakable squat shape of a German Mark III, accompanied by a lesser Mark II, coming right through the leaguer about 100 yards from me. I thought I was seeing things. But they were there all right, turret closed, jinking about a bit, but coming straight for us. Everybody around me suddenly went to ground, very properly. I was unused to this sort of evasive action, and I did what was for me the instinctive thing. I made as fast as I could for the nearest Honey.

It was facing away from the approaching panzers, and as I clambered up the back I could see the commander looking rather abstractedly out towards the west, without a clue as to what was happening just behind him.

"Hey, you!" I yelled, thumping him on the shoulder and noticing with some relief as I did so that he was a sergeant. "There's a Jerry tank just behind you. Shoot it."

He looked up at me blankly, uncomprehending.

"Where are you from?" I shouted. "What battalion?"

"Fourth Armoured Brigade Headquarters," he said, and then, looking at my shoulder, added "Sir."

"Then for Christ's sake, man, get after those tanks."

I pointed to the panzers which were now just going past about 30 yards away, their guns silent, still heading north in a puzzled sort of way, scattering men like a bow-wave from their course.

"This is the signals tank, sir. We've never fired the gun."

"Out," I said. "Quick!"

"But the Brigadier . . ."

I grabbed him by his webbing equipment and jerked him out of the turret. "Never mind the brigadier. I'll fix it when I see him. Out!"

He accepted the situation, bemused and reluctant. I climbed into the turret and grabbed the inter-com mike.

"Driver, advance right. Gunner, get that bloody cannon loaded. You're going to get yourself a German tank in about two minutes."

I don't know what their reaction was. I hoped to hell that the driver knew how to drive and that the gunner knew how to aim and pull the trigger. I didn't even know that there were three men down there. However, the tank started to move, and it went in the ordered direction. The breech block clanged as the shell was rammed in, so that was all right, too. The panzers did not confront me with any serious problem. I had a rough idea of what was happening inside those Jerry turrets. They had gone astray from their column, and were a damn sight more frightened than any of the South Africans they were scattering. We went pretty carefully through the leaguer to avoid running over anybody, and then caught up with the Mark III about 100 yards outside the perimeter. It still seemed in a bit of a daze, wondering where to go. It took my anonymous gunner three shots to hit it, then I saw the tracer going into the engine louvres, and smoke started to roll out immediately. At the same time the turret opened and the crew spilled out. As soon as they saw what was happening the men inside the Mark II got weaving. They shot off into the open space between the two leaguers. I saw a couple of Marmon-Harrington armoured cars closing in on it, and left them to it. The crew of the Mark III started to walk back towards us with their hands raised. I pointed them out to a bunch of South Africans nearby, and they went over to bring them in.

My new crew and I drove happily back through the leaguer. It felt good to have a tank around me again. Inside the turret I could

see the gunner and operator looking very pleased with themselves, and I leaned down and patted the gunner on the back. "You ain't seen nuthin' yet," I said to myself, "poor buggers."

The Honey moved carefully through the clustered transport, heading for the southern side where I hoped to find my C.O. and get under command again. Every now and again a native would jump up from a slit trench with arms raised in surrender. I dug into my memory for Zulu and kitchen-kaffir inanities and cuss-words, and yelled them at those bewildered blacks. It was great to see the look of incredulity on their faces and then the sheepishness and the great guffawing and headshaking as the situation penetrated. "Ow! This was something else to tell them back at the kraal. The Moff who told me to 'Hamba lapa kaia kawena' when I surrendered. Ow!"

The rest of the battalion Honeys were spread along the south-facing edge, and we joined them just in time to get mixed up in a wild and indiscriminate encounter with a column of German tanks and transport which was moving north-west across the corner of the leaguer. We all started blazing away like mad, and with a couple of troops of anti-tanks guns joining in and some 25-pounders thumping away from somewhere in the rear, the attack—if it was meant to be an attack on us—was beaten off, and the column moved off out of range. Two or three enemy armoured cars straggled about behind the column, and when I thought it discreet enough, I shot my Honey out towards them to cut them off. Two of them got away, but I cornered one after a short running fight. We pulled alongside as the white handkerchief fluttered from the top of the turret, and a very frightened face looked over the top. I indicated the leaguer, and told him, with much gesticulation, to get moving. A South African armoured car came up, and together we shepherded the enemy vehicle back. When I felt sure he would not try and get away I left them, and swanned about the now-empty desert looking for some more easy pickings. It felt nice and unconfined out there, and I was in no hurry to get back, but nothing happened, so we moved leisurely towards the leaguer. The leisureliness was deliberate. That leaguer was rimmed by a number of trigger-happy gunners, in tanks and behind 2-pounders. Any form of violent movement on their front could startle one of them into action. After the events of the past twenty-four hours nobody could be blamed for shooting first and holding the post mortem later. That was why, as we drew nearer, I waved my handkerchief

over my head and hoped to God the gunners had studied their tank silhouettes. Nobody fired, and we moved peacefully into the brigade lines.

I was making for a little cluster of Honeys which had moved from the southern flank and seemed to be taking up a position facing west when, without any order from me, the tank came to a jerky stop. I knew what the answer was before the driver's message reached me—we had run out of petrol.

I told the crew to dismount, and got down to see if there was any petrol to be scrounged from the South Africans. At a nearby lorry a young officer explained that they were very short themselves, but he would let me have one four-gallon tin. It was ordinary motor spirit, of course, and I could not expect to get any high octane stuff from that echelon. I carried the tin back to the Honey and saw that my new driver was just climbing out of the front. It was the first time I had seen him. To my astonishment, he had no sooner got to the ground than he started running round and round in small circles with a wild look on his face. The poor chap had just been in action for the first time in his life, and hadn't the faintest idea where he was or what he was doing.

The other two members of the crew stood there gaping at him, but did nothing. I walked quickly over, and as the driver went past on one of his running circles I caught him with a tremendous kick in the backside. It jerked his head back and stopped him in his tracks. I grabbed him by the shoulder, and shook him hard. "Listen. I'm your new tank commander. We're in the South African leaguer. Our Honey has run out of petrol. Here's a four-gallon tin. Now, fill up."

He made a visible effort to pull himself together, rubbed his behind a little, said "Yes, sir," picked up the tin and went to work. I told the wireless operator to get back on the set and try and get on to the battalion net, so that I could keep in contact with my C.O. The gunner came up to say that the machine gun had never been fired, and he'd like to go and check it and the ammo.

"That's the stuff," I told him. "That Browning will be the end of all of us if it doesn't work properly at the right time . . . and don't forget to carve yourself a couple of notches on the 37-mm. barrel!"

While the crew were getting things ready I walked over to the edge of the leaguer, and looked out across the desert to the west where, half an hour before, the German column had gone past in

a blaze of gunfire, dust and smoke. Where all had been noise and frightfulness the sands were now silent and barren. Suddenly I saw three vehicles come over a low rise and halt on the horizon about two miles away. I could just see men running about in a bustle of activity, and with some curiosity I lifted my binoculars and focused on them. I was flabbergasted to see a troop of German field guns just going into action. As I watched I saw the puffs of smoke from the gun muzzles as they fired round after round in a northerly direction towards the Sidi Rezegh escarpment.

They seemed to be quite oblivious of the presence of enemy troops within two miles of them, though they could not possibly have missed seeing that vast array of transport. They were either completely clueless or completely arrogant. I had already, more or less subconsciously, made up my mind what to do, working out the chances of success, calculating the recklessness required. I searched the desert carefully for any signs of approaching enemy vehicles or for any dug-in infantry and anti-tank guns that might be protecting the battery. There was nothing. The desert was bare. The German gunners were on their own. I ran back to my Honey.

I knew what I was going to do, but I needed a little support, and looked round hopefully, wishing that Harry Maegraith could be alongside me. Down the line of trucks and 2-pounder portees I picked out the familiar turret of one of our tanks. I ran quickly down and climbed up behind the commander, a flamboyant-moustached lieutenant in the 5th Battalion. I didn't waste time asking what the hell he was doing there, but told him quickly about the guns and what I was going to do and that I wanted him to come with me. He looked as though he didn't quite believe what I was saying but then he had a long look through his binoculars, and was plainly impressed by the possibilities, although still reluctant.

"I'd better ask the C.O.," he began rather hesitantly.

"Don't ask him; tell him. Look, you'll see me leaving the leaguer just up there. Follow me."

I jumped down before he had time to argue or think up any of the very good reasons why he shouldn't do it. Back on my Honey everything was set, guns loaded and engine running—even if not too smoothly on that inadequate petrol. The operator hadn't been able to raise the colonel, but that didn't matter for the time being.

"Driver advance," I ordered and steered him carefully through

the vehicles before telling him to speed up. We made a wide deviation once we had got clear of the leaguer so that we could come up behind the German guns.

I took one look behind me and saw the other Honey following on. Then gave all my attention to my little plan. We were doing a good 30 miles an hour now, and the success of the whole venture depended upon getting right up to the Germans before they saw us. There was no difficulty about anticipating their immediate reactions. If they didn't run like hell they would swing their guns round and try and knock us out; but as the barrels were pointing up at the sky somewhere to give them the range to the escarpment, it was not a thing to cause a great deal of concern. It was simply a matter of timing. If they saw me in time to swing their guns round and depress them, then we had had it. If we were able to get on top of them unnoticed, there was no danger. Every second made us more secure. The other Honey was swerving round behind me—not going quite as fast as I wanted him to perhaps, but it wasn't his idea anyway. Certainly there was no time for slowing down and waiting for him to catch up. It did not matter much where he was; in fact, the mere sight of him steaming up would be enough to accentuate and maintain the impression I was sure of creating.

Three hundred yards to go, and the German guns were still firing northwards, their gunners engrossed in their occupation. Another second or two and I could see clearly the gun teams going through their well-drilled loading and firing and re-loading movements. Not a single head was turned in my direction. Already I knew I had eliminated the possibility of being blown to bits by any of those shells unless something went very wrong at my end. After a certain point of time and distance, I was in command of the moment. It is a fine feeling.

With about 150 yards to go someone suddenly spotted me. I could almost hear the wild yell of fright and alarm, and see the look of disbelief and consternation as every visible face turned towards the racing tank. Then the Jerries scattered from behind their guns, and I gave a sharp order: "Driver, slow down . . . halt. Browning, men and guns, fire!"

The tank pulled up not 50 yards from the enemy, and as we lurched to a standstill the Browning barked briefly. I watched the sand flick up around and beyond the guns. I waited for the next burst, and then sensed with some dismay that the blasted gun had jammed. At the same time I saw the field-gun nearest me swinging

round as a couple of men behind it—a good deal braver than the rest—worked feverishly to get it round and trained on the Honey. I wasn't particularly worried, as I could see the barrel still pointing upwards at an angle of about 45 degrees; but there wasn't going to be all that amount of time, and above all I had to maintain the psychological impact. I gave another order down the inter-com: "Thirty-seven, nearest field-gun, fire."

There was a pause of about three seconds as tank and gun crew worked desperately to get the first shot in. The Jerries never had a chance. They had managed to get their weapon swivelled round roughly in my direction and then, panic-stricken, one of them had pulled the trigger. I heard the bang, saw the smoke and heard the whoosh of air above me all in one split second. Every detail of the faces of those three men is etched on my memory. I could see the unshaven growth on cheeks and chins. I could see duty and courage struggling with fear and contorting their faces into awful grimaces. The man nearest me was feverishly turning a handle which was depressing the gun slowly; the muzzle was dropping inch by inch. Just behind him another man had picked up a shell and was slamming it into the breech. Around the corner of the gun I could see half a man crouched in an aiming position. It was three seconds of time encompassing half a dozen lifetimes. It took my gunner three seconds to get the cross-wires trained on the heart of that field-gun. Then he pulled the trigger. The whipcrack of the 37-mm. hit my ears, and I saw the quick, dull-red circle glow in the solid metal of the gun in front of me. The Germans dropped to the sand. Immediately one got up and hobbled off, his right hand holding his leg just above the knee, the other arm raised in a gesture of surrender. The other two men lay where they had fallen, and I did not see them move again. The second Honey pulled up alongside, its guns trained on a bunch of 30 or 40 men who had collected between vehicles and guns with hands held high. Some of them were crawling incongruously through the sand on hands and knees.

In spite of the successful outcome of the little raid, the situation was not one which I relished. Those Germans were frightened to death at the moment, but sooner or later one of them would summon up a shred of courage and take a pot-shot at me with a Luger—unless I could keep them frightened to death. I shouted to the operator to pass me out the Tommy-gun, and when I got it I fired a couple of sharp bursts into the sand behind any Jerry who was a bit slow in joining his comrades. I yelled at them in Afrikaans

and made expressive gestures with my hands. Their reaction was quite automatic . . . they reached higher than ever with their arms and fell into a solid column of fours. Some of them even beckoned to the stragglers to get a move on. Soon they were heading for our leaguer area at a shambling trot.

At this moment several men jumped out of the back of one of the lorries and ran towards my tank. They were wearing battle dress and black, tank-corp berets, and were yelling like mad. I took my earphones off to hear them. "British," they shouted "British. We're British." They stopped at the foot of the Honey and shouted again at me, still bewildered at the startling turn of events.

"We're British, sir. We were captured."

"O.K." I said grinning at them. "Jump on."

They clambered on to the back and settled down among the bedding, chattering with pleasure and relief and relaxed tension.

The prisoners were still shambling off, shepherded by the other Honey, and I turned my attention to the guns. For a few seconds I contemplated hitching them all up behind the lorries and driving them back. It would have been a nice finale to the act which, I couldn't help recognizing, was about 50 per cent exhibitionism anyway. Then away to the south I saw the dark shapes appearing over the horizon, and moving quickly towards us. The race was on and I didn't intend to lose it, even if it meant losing my prisoners. Before we left I had the gunner plant a solid 37-mm. shot into each gun, aiming at the breech block. A shell landed about 40 yards away and it was quickly followed by a second, considerably nearer. It was time to go.

Now it was over, the reaction set in. As far as I was concerned the whole thing was quite purposeless if I did not get back to the South Africans all in one piece. I felt like running away as fast as possible . . . back to the herd.

There were still the prisoners. I no longer had a great deal of interest in them, and found it impossible, not for the first or last time, to work up any positive feelings of dislike or enmity. My concern in getting them back was purely a matter of finishing things off adequately, of getting the signature of universal approval. But it wasn't all that important.

Shells were beginning to fall regularly, and every now and again I felt the unmistakable, breathtaking swish of an armour-piercing shot going past. We hurried after the trotting column and the other Honey. Instinctively I placed the tank so that the prisoners

were between me and the enemy vehicles advancing from the south. I felt a little ashamed about this, but what the hell?

Then our Honey came to a dead stop and the engine spluttered into silence. The self-starter whirred away in short bursts of frustration and I thought immediately: "God damn and blast it, the bloody petrol."

The second Honey was moving slowly further and further away, apparently in ignorance of our plight. I told the driver to keep on trying in the hope that it may have been just a blocked feed, and then got everybody on my tank to wave their arms like mad to attract the attention of the red-moustached commander who was slipping gently, it seemed, out of my life. We were out of touch with anybody on the air who could do us any good, and all our hopes were centred in that one silhouette perched on top of a receding turret. The black shapes over our right shoulder were coming a little more purposefully across the desert floor now, but their shell-fire still seemed a bit hesitant and inaccurate. They must have wondered what the hell was going on.

The three troopers on the back co-operated enthusiastically in our efforts to attract attention. Their faces were a picture of understandable misery at the prospect of being blown to pieces by a direct hit or of being put in the bag once again. We still had a good 1,000 yards to go to the comparative safety of the South African leaguer, and I was beginning to think of walking it when I saw the other Honey stop, pause a moment or two in indecision, and then come wheeling back towards us.

When it came alongside it did not take more than a second or two to discover that neither vehicle had a tow-rope. There was nothing for it but to abandon the tank and transfer to the other one. By now the oncoming panzers were about as far from us as we were from the leaguer. We could not expect for very much longer to enjoy this rather haphazard immunity. My 5th Tanks colleague evidently thought so, too. We were no sooner on board than he ordered full speed ahead and we roared past the column of Germans, still headed for the distant leaguer with arms in the air. It was a pity to leave them, but I was all for it. The last I saw of them was a black blob on the desert, still moving, but with their hands no longer raised. It was not difficult to imagine their conversation.

The Honey was getting near the friendly perimeter now, going hell-bent. I waited for it to slow down, and then noticed that the tank commander was looking back towards the Jerries and that

any minute the vehicle would go plunging into our own lines. I yelled and bent down over the front to try and stop the driver with a hand signal. At the same time the commander must have seen the situation looming up swiftly ahead of him, and given a violent order to the driver. The Honey stopped dead in its tracks. Unfortunately, I went sailing on at about 35 miles an hour and landed with a frightful crunch on my shoulder and the side of my face, at the feet of some very puzzled anti-tank gunners. I walked into the leaguer area sore, cursing and picking bits of gravel out of my skin.

It was no doubt, a suitable anti-climax. I felt lousy and deflated; and I was on my flat feet again, tankless. My recent crew gravitated towards me with the three escaped prisoners. I told them to try and locate their sergeant and then report to the most senior officer they could find.

"Thanks for everything," I said to them. "You've done very well. See you back at brigade one of these days."

They saluted smartly and went off looking, I thought, rather relieved. I wandered around trying to pick out a Honey in the welter of vehicles that could lead me to the Colonel and, if possible, another tank.

I found the Honeys first and then the C.O., in a small group of officers and N.C.O.s huddled over their maps. I joined them silently, but if I hoped to discover what was going on everywhere I was to be disappointed. With brief jabs of his finger the C.O. pointed to where he thought various headquarters were. 4th Armoured Brigade was scattered all over the desert; he had heard nothing of our own "A" and "B" Squadrons, and 5th Tanks and 8th Hussars were in more or less the same position. The general situation was equally obscure and confused, but it had been reported that there was a considerable concentration of enemy tanks and vehicles to the south and south-west of our position. General Gott, commanding 7th Armoured Division, had been personally in touch with the C.O., and we had orders to stay in the South African leaguer and assist them against any attack which might be made.

For a moment or two I considered telling them about my little episode with the field-guns, but as the first sentences formed themselves in my mind it struck me that it would sound like a hell of a line-shoot, and this was neither the time nor the place for line-shooting. We walked together down to the southern edge of the

encampment, and stared across the sand and scrub to the south-west. Only the burnt-out remains of tanks and lorries and the motionless shapes of unrecognizable derelicts relieved the flat monotony. I wondered what had happened to my prisoners and to their guns, and to the tanks which had chased us off. I scanned the horizon to the west but could see no sign of them. With a proper awareness of the situation they had probably wasted no time in getting away.

There was a long, low ridge some two or three miles to the southward of where we stood, and it must have been behind this fold in the ground that the massing of enemy forces was invisibly proceeding. I looked at my watch as we broke up, and the tank commanders went back to their vehicles. I was surprised to see that the morning had gone. A strange and ominous lull drifted over the afternoon, grey under its canopy of cloud. Men moved silently between slit trenches, working shirtless to get them deeper, or sat leaning back against truck wheels eating their meagre rations. Every now and then an armoured car would move swiftly across the skyline.

I told the Colonel shortly how I had come to be without a tank—it was news to him that I had managed to get one—and said that I would like to have another one to go out and try and recover mine. He let me have one of his headquarters troop, and I had a quick meal on my new crew's biscuits and jam. We even had a brew on a borrowed South African fire while I practised my rusty Afrikaans. I was in no great hurry.

Just after 3 o'clock the adjutant came round our half-dozen tanks to tell each of us that the armoured cars out in front had reported a mass movement of the enemy towards the leaguer area, and that an attack seemed to be imminent. Each tank was to select a position between the anti-tank guns which had moved into line around the southern and western perimeters. The only battle orders we had were to keep the enemy out.

We climbed back into our tanks—all weary in body and spirit, numb under the accumulating impact of events, without the energy for imagination, without the anticipation of fear. Each Honey moved off to the spot selected by its commander. I chose a vacant space between two 2-pounders still mounted on the backs of their portees, their crews crouched behind the flimsy protection of the gun shield. They looked horribly exposed on top of those vehicles, and I wondered why they hadn't gone to ground and got

properly dug-in. From being on the receiving end, I knew only too well what a vicious weapon a concealed, dug-in anti-tank gun can be. I leaned over and asked them why they preferred to be on top of their truck instead of below the surface. They grinned back at me, and said they hadn't been in any one place more than an hour for the past two days, and asked if I had tried to do any digging around those parts.

"It's as rocky as hell under the top six inches," they told me.

"Well," I grinned back. "It's none of my mucking business."

It was too late to do anything about it, anyway. We were grouped right on the south-western corner of the leaguer, facing almost due south. We had barely finished our little chat when the horizon to our front grew unsubstantial and mobile with the dark silhouettes of what looked like hundreds of vehicles. I shouted "Hier kom hulle" to my South African neighbours, and told the gunner to load both guns. Then, with touchy memories of the morning, I ordered the driver to switch off. If we had to stay there we wouldn't be needing the engine. If we had to move we would need all the petrol we could save. I felt sorry for the driver, in his silent, impotent little cabin, seeing that visible death coming towards him.

As the massed enemy drew nearer they became distinguishable as a vast array of tanks, guns and lorried infantry in what was by now a familiar battle formation—a solid, embattled column with the heavy panzers at the head of the battering ram in a ponderous phalanx of destruction, followed by the lines of tall lorries protected on flank and rear by the ranks of light tanks and armoured cars. There appeared to be 20 or 30 panzers in the leading block, and about as many other armoured vehicles in the rest of the column.

"Christ," I thought, "this is it; nothing can stop that lot. It's worse than yesterday. Yesterday I could at least run away."

They came steadily nearer—a great, black juggernaut of irresistible menace; the sombre camouflage of the tanks red-tinged as the frightened sun sank behind them. Then our artillery went into action, breaking up the solidarity of the design with sudden bursts of smoke and dirt. But there was no break in the tempo or the purpose of that evil, crawling mass. We waited for the tanks to come within range of our puny guns, letting the full and horrible fascination of the sight sink indelibly into our minds, forever. To some of us "forever" was still going to be quite a long

time; to some of us "forever" was only going to be a few more seconds.

As I watched them I became aware that the course they were on would carry them past the leaguer. They were heading north-west, and unless they changed direction they would run right across the south-western corner a good 500 yards clear. I felt a vast weight lift off my spirit. We were not going to be physically overrun by those massive tracks. We were not the real objective. Somewhere over the horizon lay the real target. The objective was still Sidi Rezegh.

It was a fleeting thought, but it lightened my darkness. We could see the gun flashes sprouting from the squat turrets, and the air grew noisy and foul as the shells started falling among us. Another full minute of dreadful inactivity as we waited for our own guns to become effective, and then 2-pounder and 37-mm. started barking back with their shriller yapping. The air was suddenly full of tracer, curving out in long rods and then cavorting up into the sky as the shot hit those thick, armoured sides.

I gave my gunner the fire order, and was momentarily startled by its familiar sound. It was exactly the same as I had given to the other gunner—how many hours and how many gunners ago?—on the airfield at Sidi Rezegh: "Thirty-seven. Enemy tanks. Stick on one until you stop it. Fire!" And I watched the red tracer screaming out as the whipcrack of the gun jarred my teeth.

"That was a hit," I told the gunner. "Stay with it."

On each side of me the South African 2-pounders were firing as fast as they could be loaded. I felt sorry for them and a little embarrassed at my own comparative security. Even as I watched, the shield in front of the right-hand gun disintegrated in slivers of steel from a direct hit, and the man sitting behind it with his eye to the telescopic sight disintegrated in slivers of flesh. Men dragged away the mutilated body, and then went back to their job. The gun went on firing for a few more shots, then the portee heaved again and two men threw up their arms and lurched off on to the sand. I got a little lower in the turret.

The enemy column was now at its closest point to the South African position, and the battle in my vicinity reached a crescendo of noise and furiousness. The mass of tanks passed steadily across our front, and the dark air was patterned with tracers and the vivid flashes of guns. Behind it all the sun had left a broad, blood red trail across the sky, bathing the desert in this ominous light,

lighting up the steel sides of the panzer horde and the dark canvas of the infantry lorries with a glow straight from the fires of hell. Automatically I watched the tracers from my own gun screaming off, not curved now but hurtling in a flat line at the nearest Mark IV's. Suddenly, above the din, I heard my gunner yelling: "Got him, sir. I've got him. That's the second bastard." I saw the great black shape halt and stay immobile as the column passed on. The turret did not open and no lazy, tell-tale smoke could be seen. I watched its gun carefully through my binoculars. It was silent.

I leant down to pat the gunner and said into the mike, grinning at him: "Nice work, cock. Keep it going. You're winning the battle."

I heard the 37-mm. crack again, and almost disinterestedly I watched the tracer. The anti-tank gun on my left was still firing hard, partly protected by the Honey's armour; the one on my right was shattered and mute, and so was its crew. Subconsciously I was aware of the tumult all around and the black, smelly clouds that wafted over the tank every few seconds from a nearby shell-burst. I was hypnotized by that mass of doom moving across the flat plane of the desert. It was a feeling stronger than fear, stronger than any sort of personal sensation, as though I were some detached, uncorporate observer functioning as a tank commander by force of habit and familiar drill.

More than ever I was conscious of relief at the realization that we were not their objective. We were an incidental obstacle; a brief encounter. "Where the hell are they going?" I thought. "Why don't they turn now and ride right over us?" But they went on, past the point of proximity, on into the emptiness of the north-west, away from us towards their intended engagement. Behind them they left the smoking relics of their passage, and as the great tanks churned on, the staccato rattle of machine-gun fire replaced the boom and thunder of the guns and shells. Every now and again a mushroom of flame and smoke would leap skyward as one of the lorries was set alight by a direct hit, spilling its human cargo on to the sands. At one moment there was a great orange-coloured upheaval, as the complete turret of a Mark III lifted bodily into the air from some internal explosion.

I felt a jerk on my trouser-leg, and looked down to hear the operator yelling that there was no more ammunition. Within the next few minutes the other tank commanders could all be heard telling the C.O. they had run out of ammo, and asking what were

they to do about it. The reply was specific. We were to stay where we were, in the line. Nobody was to move until ordered.

It was a grim ten minutes—just sitting there in that turbulent twilight while the shells whined and crashed round, and the desert heaved and men reared up grotesquely and then lay still or twitching. But the high peak of the action had passed with the passing of the panzers, and every minute lessened the tension and the menace.

With our guns pitifully silent, fighting the enemy with static armour-plating and the moral effect of our presence on those about us, I don't think any of the Honeys would have moved out of line at that moment even if they had been allowed to. As the tempo of the battle slackened and the light dwindled with a cruel reluctance, we got our orders to pull out and rally by the colonel's tank about 100 yards back. We could just see the twin yellow pennants fluttering at the head of his wireless aerial. The order emphasized that we were to reverse very slowly out of our positions and to create as little alarm as possible. There was still plenty of stuff whizzing around, but mostly small-arms fire, and I think the less fortunate people on the ground found our continued presence some reassurance against a possible infantry attack.

I told the driver to start up, and had my usual moment of suspense and relief as the starter whirred and the engine fired. We moved back imperceptibly, but I was immediately conscious of the puzzled, angry looks on the faces of the infantrymen and gunners. I knew exactly what they were thinking and, for the sake of the tanks rather than myself, I shouted to them "Our ammo's finished. We're just pulling back to get more." Their expression changed to relief and understanding. Some of them smiled and waved or gave the thumbs-up sign. We continued to back away slowly, through the vehicles and slit trenches, past all the other worried, perplexed looks; feeling uncomfortable about it, but glad to go.

From different corners of the perimeter the meagre band of Honeys converged on the high pennants. Alongside the Colonel's tank was a lean-looking Crusader and perched on its turret studying a map was our C.O., together with a tall man in a white sheepskin jacket and a peaked cap. I recognized him as General Gott, the divisional commander. "Poor devil," I thought; "what a way to have to run a battle—tearing round the desert looking for your brigades and regiments; telling each group separately what they

had to do; trying to make something cohesive out of that utter confusion." At the same time I wondered if we wouldn't all have been better off if the Generals had stayed at their posts.

A few minutes' quick conversation, and the colonel jumped down, saluting smartly as the Crusader wheeled about and snaked off into the gathering night. The C.O. beckoned us over. It was just to tell us we were to pull back into a New Zealand leaguer for the night. He couldn't satisfy our curiosity or relieve our bewilderment and fears. Apparently nobody, not even the enemy, knew what the hell was going on anywhere.

Somehow we all felt very much better at the knowledge that there were now New Zealand troops in the battle area. It was not only that it meant that here were new sources of strength which had not yet been fully committed, but from a joint experience in Greece and Crete we knew what wonderful troops they were. I know what was in my mind, and I think it was a feeling shared by all of us . . . that we would be able to get some rest during the night without fear of being massacred. We went off behind the C.O. in a much brighter frame of mind, buoyed up by the knowledge of the powerful forces still unused on our side and confident that the battle we had thought nearly lost would now be won.

In single file we moved away from the South Africans, wondering what would happen to them, hoping someone would do something about them. In the darkness we came to the New Zealanders, moving cautiously until we had cleared their outlying pickets. We were expected, and were guided to an area in which we could spend the few hours before the lightening east would disperse us again in wakefulness. My new tank crew, being in headquarters troop, were adepts at making hot tea without showing a flicker of light. That was a mug of tea! When we had finished it, too tired to be hungry and too exhausted and satiated with incident to discuss the day past or the day to come, we fell asleep where we sat or slouched.

My own few lines of immortality on Totensonntag were scribbled in German in the War Diary of 15th Panzer: ". . . a Batterie of Artillerie Regiment 33 was overrun by a sudden charge of English tanks and forced to surrender. The Batterie was recaptured and later brought into action again."

Much later, I hope.

SEVENTH DAY

By 6 o'clock the Honeys were dispersed outside the New Zealand perimeter. We were rested, and we had had permission to brew up. My crew had not been used to going without a hot breakfast, and were pretty well organized to get one. They had not yet had to make one of those wild dashes for the tank leaving the kettle half-boiled and bacon just warming up as the first shell pitched into the sand or the first yell came over the air that panzers were approaching. Leaving a brew half-brewed was one of the most difficult things to do in that campaign. It was a decision often measured carefully against a shattered limb or death. There was no violent interruption this morning, and no breakfast was ever enjoyed more than that fried bacon laid on hard biscuit, followed by hot, strong tea.

At 9 o'clock a three-tonner came round to each tank and filled it up with high octane spirit. I thought of my drained-dry Honey of the previous day, and wondered what had happened to it. The first orders came over the air. We were to rejoin Headquarters, 4th Armoured Brigade, by marching six miles on a bearing of 117 degrees and a further six miles on a bearing of 158 degrees. Staff officers had obviously spent a busy night trying to get formations together again after the holocaust and disintegration of Sidi Rezegh.

The 3rd Battalion's paltry six Honeys—we were still minus "A" and "B" Squadrons—moved off in an easterly direction. I looked at the map resting on the turret-top in front of me, tracing our intended journey past trig. points, birs and hagfets that had now grown familiar through frequent reference. After half an hour of uneventfulness we heard that Brigade H.Q. was on its way from the south-west, and we were to make contact at Bir el Haleizen. There, at noon, we met up once again with Brigadier Gatehouse.

From that moment on I can truthfully say that none of us had more than the vaguest idea where we were from day to day and hour to hour, or what was happening either to our own forces or the enemy's. The campaign swung violently from one end of the desert to the other. One morning we would be south-west of

Sidi Rezegh; the next afternoon we would be well east of the point at which we had spent the first night after crossing The Wire. That I had actually seen the rooftops of Bardia that second afternoon was an unbelievable dream, part of another unreal existence. There was no such thing as advance and retreat. We roared off to areas of threat or engagement depending on the urgency of the information. We chased mirages and were chased by mirages. Every few hours a landmark or a name would punch our memories with an elusive familiarity, and we would recall a forgotten early incident or a battle fought there days before that was now part of a past so near in time but so distant in event.

We went without sleep, without food, without washing or change of clothes, without conversation beyond the clipped talk of wireless procedure and orders. In permanent need of everything civilised, we snatched greedily at everything we could find, getting neither enjoyment nor nourishment.

The daily formula was nearly always the same—up at any time between midnight and 4 o'clock; movement out of the leaguer into battle positions before first light; a biscuit and spoonful of marmalade before the flap or orders and information; the long day of movement and vigil and encounter, death and the fear of death, until darkness put a limit to vision and purpose on both sides; the drawing in of far-flung formations; the final endurance of the black, close-linked march to the leaguer area; the maintenance and replenishment and order groups that lasted till midnight; the beginning of another 24 hours.

Within this framework the battles were fought, the tanks were knocked out, the crews killed, or maimed or fried. At the end of each day the brief relief of the last-light pause, when the desert grew quiet and cold and the moon rose on the sand and scrub making black shadows of the escarpments and moving black shadows of the funereal columns of smoke . . . that pause had to be used to contact troop and squadron and regiment till the long lines of Honeys and Crusaders, like chains of dogs sniffing their introduction and recognition, moved off nose-to-tail in the night. Deluges of sand and dust kicked up by the tracks flooded into turrets, splashing on the inert, shapeless forms of gunner and operator already in a realm of unconsciousness that could never be called sleep, showering on the tank commander, trying by reassuring chatter over the inter-com, to keep his driver awake. They were nightmare rides, but they had the merit of being with-

out fear and imagined annihilation; there was always the security of the leaguer at the end of the ride.

Most of us allayed the weariness and discomfort of those night marches by tuning in to the B.B.C. or that Middle European station which, night after night, played Lili Marlene for the benefit of the Afrika Korps and the tear-jerking nostalgia of the Eighth Army. So the night and the snatched sleep and the unwilling dawn.

This first day after Sidi Rezegh was to set the pattern of many that followed. The remnants of 4th Armoured Brigade dribbled in from all corners of the desert until it became re-established as a fighting unit, if only at half-strength. The 3rd Battalion was still minus two squadrons which, we heard, were swanning about somewhere with other organizations.

There was an early conference of senior officers, but not even at Brigade Headquarters could any authentic picture be created of what was happening in the battle. There seemed to be a general impression in the upper strata that Rommel and his armoured divisions had been roughly handled throughout the campaign, and that all his moves were tactical withdrawals. Whether this was a deliberately-created impression I do not know—we certainly found it difficult to believe, but we clung hopefully to the idea that it was right. It was far more likely to have been the result of misleading reports of the amount of damage and casualties inflicted on the enemy.

Gatehouse, who could not have been ignorant of the true situation, was always supremely confident simply because it was not in his nature to feel any other way. He was completely sure of himself and his ability to control any situation his forces found themselves in. It was only down at our level, in the turrets and the slit trenches, that we had our doubts. We were seldom under the impression that we had given the Germans a hell of a hiding in any of the organized encounters. Usually, we just hoped that in some other locality, in some other part of the battle, he was having a worse time than he was getting from us. Thank God, he very often was.

Our C.O. came back from that conference without the gen we were all hoping for, and we were sent scurrying out in a protective screen around Brigade H.Q. An attack was expected from the north where, apparently, large enemy forces were deploying. Over the skyline, about eight miles away, lay the landing ground of Sidi

Rezegh. Already, as far as I was concerned, it was just a fantastic memory. There was just no room for it in the overcrowded present and future.

The day wore on in uneventful watchfulness, while we lay immobile. We had to struggle continually to keep awake. In mid-afternoon we were jerked into full awareness by an order to assist 5th Tanks in an attack on a large enemy column of M.E.T. which was moving south-east, about four miles from us. With my troop in the lead, we travelled about five miles in the direction indicated, but I was unable to report any visible sign of the enemy. We came to a rather straggling halt, wondering where the hell to go from there, when we got an urgent summons back to Brigade, who were again expecting an attack from the north-west. We made quick time back over our earlier track marks, to find the headquarters tanks and vehicles lying somnolent in the sun and the horizons empty of any moving threat. Another ten minutes and we were heading back east again spurred on by that now familiar-sounding phrase "a large column of enemy M.E.T. heading south-east". This time it was real enough.

A long dense line of vehicles stretched solidly across the desert, moving slowly from north to south. It looked like the Exodus. From a suitable turret-down position with only my head and shoulders and binoculars above the sky-line I scanned the column about 2,000 yards ahead. Everything was clear in detail—the dark, square shapes of the infantry lorries with heads peering curiously out of the open back, the hundreds of supply vehicles, the great, gaunt skeletons of a number of 88-mm. guns on tow, and not a tank nor an armoured car in sight. I switched the glasses back to the 88s. Their crews were mounted idly on various parts of the gun and framework and on the towing unit. They were moving slowly along with the broad mainstream of vehicles; placed as they were in the middle of the column, they clearly had no rôle other than movement. It would take them a good five minutes to get those great guns into action, and in half that time we could be running over them.

Switching the mike to the battalion frequency, I told the C.O. of the prize that lay waiting. It was clear from the orders that followed his acknowledgment that other eyes than mine were watching and other voices reporting. The brigadier had, in fact, just ordered the three tank regiments—or what was left of them—to attack in line on a broad front. Down the whole length of the

German column's left flank the Honeys were marshalling, and at the signal to go we tore across the intervening desert in a manner that would have brought great joy to the Earl of Cadogan.

Harry Maegraith's Honey was alongside me, with my troop tanks on the other side, and as we plunged forward I made an encircling pincer motion with both arms to indicate to them that we should run right through the vehicles and then turn back and try and enclose them. It was an exhilarating charge. The dense mass of vehicles before us broke in panic and scattered all over the desert. Soon all our machine-guns were chattering away with vicious gossip. A great 88-mm. was lumbering along, its driver and crew looking over their shoulders with terrified faces. This type of gun had come to be our particular enemy, but I did not want to slow down to deal with it, as I was intent on the original manœuvre. As I sailed past the 88-mm. I emptied the chamber of my revolver at it, and then ducked into the turret as I saw the tanks on the opposite side of it traversing their guns to engage it.

The whole enemy column was now in full flight along its whole length. Vehicles were careering across the desert regardless of boulders and ditches, and the tanks were no longer gaining on them. I ordered my troop to turn about and shoot up everything that came past. We had a fine time for about ten minutes, and then, as the landscape gradually drained itself of fleeing transport, we swanned about picking off stragglers, shooting up abandoned lorries and chivvying the scores of dismounted Jerries who were roaming about with hands in the air. Two abandoned 88s attracted most attention. We were staggered at the size of the things; no wonder they could blow our tanks to pieces at 3,000 yards!

Harry Maegraith came on the air suddenly to tell me that he could see a Jerry tank. We pulled up alongside each other and had a good look at it, chatting confidentially about it through the sets.

"That's a Mark IV, Harry. Shall we have a crack at it?"

"I'm game."

"Right. Then this is what we'll do. I'll swan about in front of it and keep it busy. You nip round the back and shoot it up when you get close enough. It's the only chance of knocking it out."

"O.K.," said Harry, and we moved off in opposite directions.

The Mark IV was moving slowly in solitary magnificence along the forward slope of a rise just south of us. It was about 1,000

yards away, and was wandering along as though it did not know where to go or what to do—a trifle forlorn but full of menace. I ran diagonally towards it without attempting concealment, but fast enough to make the chances of being hit very remote. Straight in front of the panzer, at a distance of about 400 yards, were a number of scrub-covered sand dunes. When I reached there I planned to duck about, shoot off a few shots and generally create an alarming diversion. The German tank commander could not fail to notice me, and soon I saw the Mark IV come to a halt and the turret swing round towards my Honey. Over my right shoulder I could see Harry making a wide encircling movement, changing direction to come up on the German from behind. I saw one puff of smoke come from the muzzle swinging round with me, but I was not aware of any shot falling. Then we were in the sand dunes, and the turret of the Mark IV was pointed straight ahead. I kept on popping up in a hull-down position and letting off a quick shot with my cannon. Each time I could see Harry creeping up on the panzer. Finally, I just sat and watched, hardly daring to breathe, as I saw the Honey coming right in as though it were going to ram that panzer in the tail. A shell pitched in the sand just in front of me, and when the smoke cleared and I put my head out again Harry's tank had pulled up not 20 yards behind the Mark IV. In the same second I saw the flash from its 37-mm. muzzle, and almost immediately the German's turret flew open and a hand waved a white cloth out of the top. Then the figure of the tank commander emerged fluttering his handkerchief, followed by the rest of the crew. I reached for the mike:

"You got the bastard. Well done, Harry. Jesus, you frightened me to death."

"Thanks, Bob," he said quietly. "I'll send these blokes back to B.H.Q. and then have a look inside. There may be some of those chocolate rations."

Nearly all German tanks carried very tasty, nourishing chocolate in their emergency rations. It was our favourite loot. We were all very pleased with ourselves, elated after the depression of the previous two days. The Colonel got on the air to congratulate Harry, and told us to start rallying on his tanks.

The Honeys of the whole Brigade were scattered all over the area, and clearly it was going to be a devil of a job getting everybody together again before dark. The sun had already set, and in the last light little groups of tanks could be seen weaving back

from the western horizon, being guided in through their wireless sets by the battalion navigator. Some of the Honeys had been going flat out after the fleeing Germans for nearly an hour, and were recalled from points more than 10 miles from their start-line. It was the first time we had found so much M.E.T. so unprotected, and we wondered what had happened to the enemy's usually meticulous protective organization on such occasions. We were to find out later that night.

Gradually individual tanks gathered into troops and troops into squadrons, forming up behind the C.O.'s tank in single file, lined up ready on the bearing that was to take us through the blind darkness to our leaguer area. As we waited in the ghostly desert light for the last strays to come in, three lonely figures appeared out of the emptiness and moved towards the column of tanks. I gave them a shout, and they quickened their pace towards my Honey; then, rather to my surprise, raised their arms above their heads. They wore the long, ankle-length dark overcoats which seemed to be general issue to all Axis troops in North Africa, and as they drew near I beckoned to them to climb aboard. This they did with alacrity, and settled down on the back of my tank among the bedding rolls and engine warmth, talking quietly among themselves.

The column started up and moved off into the night in the customary linked chain, and as I peered out of the top of the turret, my eyes closed to slits against the dust and sand, I got an unpleasant feeling in the back of my head. Those three prisoners might be armed, and if they changed their minds about being put in the bag they could shoot me in the back, jump off the tank and get away without anybody being much the wiser. I didn't mind them getting away; prisoners were always a damn nuisance to tank crews; but I didn't want to be shot in the back of the head. I climbed out of the turret and sat facing them with my legs dangling over the steel edge. I hauled the tommy-gun from its rack and laid it ostentatiously beside me.

No sooner had I settled down than one of the prisoners stood up and started to take off his greatcoat—much to my surprise, as the nights were always bitterly cold as soon as the sun left the sky. I was even more astonished when he leaned over and wrapped the overcoat round my bare knees. It seemed to be a spontaneous gesture springing from God-knobs-what sort of impulse and it made me feel acutely embarrassed. I jumped to the conclusion

that here were three unfortunate Italians who had probably been waiters or valets in civil life. We knew there were thousands of Italian troops in Libya, and we longed for a crack at their armoured division, but somehow we never seemed to be fighting anything but Germans and panzers. I knew no Italian but summoned up a "Non, non," and a couple of "Grazie or Grazias" and tried to push the coat back at him, feeling suddenly sorry for that pathetic trio and the fear and the loneliness that had brought them to me. The man protested with his hands and indicated vehemently the long trousers he was wearing and my flimsy khaki shorts. My own hands spoke back at him in refusal; then I pointed to each of them and said, loudly above the engine noise: "Italy? Italy? Italy?"

I could see the look of dismay and disgust that came over their faces. "Nein, nein," they said together, emphatically. "Afrika Korps. Deutsch. Deutsch."

I made no further protest when the man wrapped me up again. "Hell's bells," I thought, "the master race."

The march back to leaguer went on interminably, and half a moon came up to fill the desert with a strange, unblinking light. The dust poured over us, and the long line of tanks expanded and contracted like a concertina on an ill-lit stage. All around us the invisible sky-line burst into spasmodic sprays of pyrotechnics, as the enemy fired clusters of white Very lights into the air, signalling recognition or seeking temporary visibility. The lights seemed to be everywhere—north, south, east, west and all the intermediate points. The desert was full of enemy.

In every Honey we were thinking the same thoughts, wondering what the hell was going on, wishing that somebody would tell us sometimes what was happening, switching our sets off the battalion frequency to the nostalgic wavelength of the B.B.C. Home Service, but hearing only a rather biased report of the previous day's happenings in the Sidi Rezegh area; thinking of the elderly men and women sitting in hotel lounges in Knightsbridge and Kensington, solemn and knowledgeable.

Late that night, with maintenance done, German chocolate eaten and the leaguer area a silent, steel-walled world peopled by shapeless slumberers and the muffled silhouettes of sentries on the turreted ramparts, a summons came to the Colonel's tank, where we crawled under a bivvy and, over the spread maps, heard with astonishment of Rommel's dash to The Wire. It was an

event that was to become the highlight of the desert war, but to us it seemed as though Rommel had gone clean off his bloody head.

We heard of the panic in the headquarters and supply areas, and were unpatriotically delighted at the thought of generals and staff officers fleeing for Alexandria or wetting themselves in slit trenches. It was the universal, if unmerited, reaction of the front-line troops at the thought of any form of disaster befalling the immunity of the rear areas. In this case we reckoned that the top command was making a complete mess of things anyway, and we could do just as well without them. We were also relieved to think that somebody else was getting the pasting and not us.

The C.O. told us that the Jerry column we had attacked that afternoon was the supply echelon for the tank forces racing up to The Wire, and we reflected with grim pleasure on the cursing that would be going on among the German tank crews when their petrol and rations failed to turn up. Our own "B" echelon, which had somehow managed to arrive with our own supplies, brought with them the most lurid tales of the panic that had struck all the headquarters areas.

My friend Alan Moorehead, war correspondent of the *Daily Express*, was perhaps the one who best captured the atmosphere of that crazy day, in his dispatch to his paper. Alan and I had been pre-war colleagues on the *Express* together with those other great correspondents Noel Monks and O'Dowd Gallagher. It was Alan, in fact, who had sent back a few days previously a story that "Bob Crisp has had both his legs shot off in a tank battle." It was some other Crisp.

On this particular afternoon Moorehead was in a party of newspapermen on their way to the battle area ostensibly to describe a great British victory. They were suddenly caught up in a mad and incomprehensible rush of vehicles all streaming in the opposite direction. "All day for nine hours," wrote Moorehead, "we ran. It was the contagion of bewilderment and fear and ignorance. Rumour spread at every halt, no man had orders. Everyone had some theory, and no one any plan beyond the frantic desire to reach his unit. We were just a few hangers-on of the battle, the ones who were most likely to panic because we had become separated from our officers and had no definite job to do. I came to understand something of the meaning of panic in this long, nervous drive. It was the unknown we were running away from, the unknown in ourselves and in the enemy. We did

not know who was pursuing us, or how many, or how long they would be able to keep up the pursuit, and whether or not they would outstrip us in the end. In ourselves we did not know what to do. Had there been someone in authority to say 'Stand there. Do this and that . . .' then half our fears would have vanished."

Most of the people in authority around Moorehead and his companions at that time were doing just what he was doing. But back in the battle area—or what had been the battle area—the flap passed us by completely. We followed its course impersonally by the coloured arrows and rings on the map as though watching a blackboard exercise at O.C.T.U. And never for one moment, either on the night when we got the first reports or at any time during the next few days when the crayoned arrows prodded deeper and deeper until they penetrated Egypt, did we have the slightest feeling of uneasiness about the situation in our rear. I do not think it an exaggeration to say that our twin emotions of relief that we were not involved, and gratitude for the respite it offered us, were the strongest things we felt about Rommel's raid. We just assumed that the German commander had made one hell of a blunder and in due course would get it in the neck. Contributory to this feeling was the complete air superiority established by the Royal Air Force and the South African Air Force over the desert. It is significant that up to this eighth day I have barely mentioned activity in the air. It was going on all the time, but in the tank units we were not involved beyond the sight of occasional packs of Stukas going over to dive-bomb our supply vehicles—though "dive-bombing" was a flattering description of the hurried passes which the Germans made in their anxiety to carry out their orders and get away again.

In my own mind I had not the slightest doubt that the Afrika Korps and its two panzer divisions had won the first major encounter at Sidi Rezegh, and that if they had stayed in command of that decisive area, they could have fought the Eighth Army to a standstill.

EIGHTH DAY

As usual, we broke leaguer at first light, but this morning we pushed out into the half-light feeling a considerable relaxation of tension. It was the knowledge that all the German tanks in

the desert were out of the area, back on the frontier, and we looked forward with some anticipation to a day in which if we encountered any enemy tanks at all, they would be Italian M13s. That was a different proposition altogether, and during the customary couple of hours' vigil waiting for full daylight most of us felt relaxed enough to make what had become a very rare hot brew.

None of us had an inkling of how near the Eighth Army commander had come to breaking off the desert battle and retiring to defensive positions along the frontier or even farther back. It is now history that the C.in.C., General Auchinleck, arrived at Army Headquarters at the decisive moment, ordered Cunningham to continue to press the offensive and left a message for the troops which was circulated during this day and which ended: "There is only one order, attack and pursue. All out everyone." These top-ranking exhortations, like half-time pep talks in an inter-school rugger match, usually get a pretty ribald reception at the other end. There is such a vast difference in the circumstances surrounding the sender and the receiver. In this case most of the panic was at headquarters; the forward troops were unaware of any crisis that was worse on that day than any other day, and Auchinleck's message, if it did anything at all, only served to increase bewilderment and unease.

By this eighth day, although still a troop commander, I was being given more and more of a free hand by the C.O., who frequently allowed me to swan off into the desert with my three troop tanks. This was not a question of lack of control on his part. He still had fewer than a dozen tanks under command; and he had come to appreciate that in view of the way this campaign was being fought, independent action, in the event of breakdown of overall direction from the top, was one way of achieving results, however localized or limited. I think he recognized, too, that I functioned best when free from restraint.

The fact that the battalion was still minus two squadrons contributed towards my freedom — though I had been put nominally under command of the "A" Squadron major who, with the Colonel, was the only officer of field rank left. An unpleasant situation was developing between these two. There was a natural clash of temperament and character which found its outlet in repeated petty squabbles which were vented publicly over the battalion wireless.

On this particular morning I had been pushed out well forward of H.Q., and was wandering about in the usual reconnaissance rôle, trying to get as far away from authority as possible. I heard my major come on the air to me and ask for information. I switched my set to send and gave him a negative reply and my rough position. This brought no acknowledgment, and after another try without success I realized that although I could hear him and all the other battalion tanks perfectly my set was unable to transmit with sufficient strength for them to hear me. It had a very weak signal and, possibly, I was farther away from H.Q. than I had thought.

Pretty soon the cool, morning air was being warmed up by some explosive, field-rank phrases asking me what the bloody hell I thought I was doing, why didn't I acknowledge his signals, why didn't I obey orders to return, etc., etc. While this was pulverizing my ears I had spotted a convoy of some 40 or 50 soft-skinned vehicles parked in open formation not far south of me. I thought I would give this a little closer inspection before returning to H.Q. I heard the major calling the C.O.: "That bloody man Bob has buggered off again. He won't answer my signals. Why the bloody hell don't you keep him under proper control?"

Then I heard the C.O. saying, surprisingly gently in the circumstances: "Hullo SABO, JUMO calling. Don't worry about Bob. He can look after himself. JUMO to SABO off."

I was delighted at my inadvertent eavesdropping; when I looked down into the turret to see the reaction, the operator looked up at me, grinning, and gave a large wink. I tried hard not to wink back.

In the meantime we had all been examining the still-stationary convoy through our binoculars. There were no tanks with them, and as far as could be seen, no anti-tank guns. But which side did they belong to—British, German or Italian? I had the impression that it was an enemy supply column with a number of captured 3-tonners. I looked across at my troop sergeant in a Honey about twenty yards away. He picked up his mike and said that he thought they were Jerry but wasn't sure. There was only one way of finding out . . . by going over to them. If they were British they ought to know what a Honey looked like, and if they started running we would know they were enemy.

Signalling to my other two tanks to conform, I gave the driver the order to advance, and we started towards the convoy, keeping

well exposed and moving slowly so as not to start a spontaneous, panic rush. We had travelled not more than 200 yards when the lorries nearest us suddenly started moving, gathering speed at a rate that showed that already they were in a flap. It was like coming suddenly upon a flock of grazing sheep or ducks. Fear spread from truck to truck and lorry to lorry almost telepathically, translating itself into an immediate desire to run with the herd. In a few seconds the whole mass of transport was hurtling across the desert in full flight.

At the first sign of this movement I had given the order to speed up. It was the confirmation we needed; and as the drivers pressed down on the accelerators and the Honeys surged forward, we opened fire with our machine guns indiscriminately at the fleeing vehicles. They were at a disadvantage from their standing start and we were soon upsides with the nearest ones. I ran my Honey alongside the flank, trying to turn them in real cowboy round-up fashion. The troop followed me in single file, and I could see the turrets swivel and the Brownings spitting lead.

Suddenly the driver of a truck I was passing leaned out and waved a white handkerchief. To my horror he was wearing a battledress and black beret. I yelled at my gunner to cease fire and at the driver to halt. Then I screamed at the sergeant and corporal behind me. Some sort of noise must have penetrated their minds—they could not possibly have heard me—and they looked towards me as I waved my hands violently in a sort of wash-out signal. They realized quickly what the situation was, and we pulled up in a rather crestfallen group as the nearest line of lorries stopped and the crews got down from their cabs.

I jumped down from the tank as I saw an officer coming from one of the trucks. Here we go, I thought; and I prepared to meet the verbal onslaught. He came quickly towards me with his hand stretched out and broad grin all over his face.

"Christ," he said. "Am I glad to see you! I thought we had had it this time."

"Hell's bells, man," I said, much relieved, "why did you pack up and run for it like that? Surely you could see. . . ."

"After yesterday we don't wait to identify anything. We just assume they're enemy. As soon as we see a tank we're off. We've been rushing everywhichway around this mucking desert ever since yesterday morning. We haven't a clue where our own people are. You've never seen such an imperial flap."

"I'm terribly sorry," I said genuinely, "but you know how it is. About the only way we can tell one lot of M.E.T. from another is the way they behave when they see us. I hope to hell we haven't done any damage."

"Don't worry about that. We don't blame you. In fact, it's such a relief to know that you're not Jerries that I couldn't care less about the damage."

We shook hands and left each other. His convoy was strung out across the sand and scrub, most of the vehicles halted, but some of the more distant ones were still heading for the east. As the three tanks moved off, I thought to myself what a rotten sort of life it must be in a "B" echelon like that: living naked in a world in which everything was an enemy until it proved friendly and everything was stronger; finding protection only in flight, without power of retaliation. I wondered which was the less reassuring prospect . . . capture and the long years behind barbed wire, or always-imminent death or mutilation. I couldn't make up my mind, but nothing would have induced me to change places with that supply officer.

We got back to the battalion and a mild rocket from the Colonel for not maintaining contact. He accepted my explanation, though I made no mention of overhearing his conversation on the air.

The morning was still young when, once more, we got an urgent summons to go to the assistance of the South African Brigade lying at Taieb el Esem. This was Dan Pienaar's outfit. In an earnest effort to deceive the enemy, it was referred to as "the boys belonging to Uncle George's nephew". General Brink, commanding the South African Division in Egypt, was known universally as Uncle George.

The whole brigade moved off on a bearing that would bring us out on the north flank of the South Africans where, apparently, they had been under constant attack from enemy tank formations all the morning. My troop was out in front on the centre line, and at 10.30 I was able to report a large force of tanks in the distance ahead of me. On getting closer I was very relieved to see that they were the M.13s of the Italian Ariete division.

Behind me the brigade took up a battle position along a low crest facing west, while I was sent forward to find out what I could about the enemy's movements. Leaving my troop tanks behind, I pushed forward cautiously through some undulating

ground which afforded good cover until I had got within about 600 yards of the Italians. Behind me the Honeys of the battalion were completely out of sight. I settled into a turret-down position, and studied the proceedings in front of me. It was quite a sight.

About 70 M13s were lined up abreast on the forward slope and crest of a long ridge that ran north and south. They stood there apparently lifeless, about 20 yards apart, their turrets firmly closed, and all facing east in the directions of 4th Armoured, whose arrival they had no doubt noticed.

It didn't look like a battle position, and it certainly didn't look as though the Italians were about to attack anything. I wondered what the idea was. Then I spotted a big lorry moving along slowly a couple of hundred yards behind the row of tanks. One by one, starting from the left of their line, they broke away and went back to the lorry, where I could plainly see men passing out jerricans of fuel and replenishing the tank. As each tank was filled up it came back to the silent line and another took its place. As soon as I realized what was happening, I yelled for artillery fire and told my C.O. to send up an O.P. from the battery of R.H.A. 25-pounders. It was a wonderful target for the guns; but it was more than that. If taken swiftly it was a wonderful opportunity to wrap up a more or less immobile Italian armoured division. I could do no more than indicate this to the higher command behind me. Personally, I had had more than enough of taking on 70 enemy tanks single-handed—even Italian tanks.

Very soon I saw the small dot of the O.P.'s Honey coming across the empty space towards me. I hoped he would use his head and take precautions that would not attract attention to the place where I was so snugly tucked in. I need not have worried. He came up alongside me without raising a wisp of dust and soon had his guns on the target.

It was good shooting, but there was never enough of it. Every gun in the area, plus a couple of visits from the R.A.F., followed up by a tank attack would have knocked Ariete right out of the war. As it was the M13s continued to refuel, not without damage, but miraculously the petrol lorry escaped obliteration and I could not but admire the way those despised Italians carried on with their job under heavy shell fire. Once a small ambulance came speeding along the row of tanks. It stopped alongside one; I saw the turret open, and an inert figure was passed down to the

stretcher-bearers, who placed it in the ambulance and then drove off again.

For five hours we lay behind that ridge watching the performance. My legs were aching with continual standing; my eyes were aching with the strain of continuous watching through binoculars; and my voice was croaking with the flow of information I was sending back every few minutes. For five hours the 4th Armoured Brigade did nothing, the 7th Armoured Division did nothing, the South African Brigade a mile or two to the south did nothing. At half-past four, their refuelling completed, the Italian tanks broke off in groups of eight or ten and moved off to the north-east, pursued only by the shells of our 25-pounders. In a few minutes the ridge in front of me that had been packed with tanks, was completely deserted. I and the O.P. turned about and went leisurely back to our respective headquarters.

It was a disappointing occasion, but for my tank crew not unrestful. They dozed and ate all through the day—something they had not been able to do since the first crossing of The Wire. We lacked only a cup or two of hot tea; there was too much risk of revealing our position and disturbing our serenity. The Brigadier sent me a special message of thanks for the very complete picture of enemy movements that had been supplied. He might just as well have hung it on the wall.

That night in leaguer, near the northern face of the South African area, one of the missing squadrons at last got in touch with the battalion H.Q. Its commander reported that for the past two days they had been operating with 22nd Armoured Brigade, and hoped to rejoin in a day or two. We hoped he'd come soon; we could do with a few extra tanks.

NINTH DAY

WE could hardly believe our ears when the orders came round the leaguer just before the dawn break-up. After a short move to the flank of Pienaar's brigade we were to do nothing except tank maintenance and "personal repairs". Unless, of course, we were attacked during the course of the day. It was emphasized that our rôle was purely defensive and we were to take up a position between the South Africans and enemy tank forces in the north, more as a gesture of reassurance than anything else. Uncle George's

nephew's boys seemed to be developing a pronounced panzer allergy—and who could blame them?

Thus at 6 o'clock we pushed off blithely on the half-hour's run to the new map reference figure. There the clear morning air was soon smeared by the quick spirals of black smoke from scores of petrol fires as every tank crew brewed up for breakfast and the subsequent luxury of hot water for washing and shaving.

As soon as the sun had risen high enough to generate a little warmth, we peeled off shirts, trousers, vests, underpants and socks and let the clean air lap around our bodies. It was the first time most of us had been able to take off anything for eight days—apart from essential services—and it was unbelievably refreshing to stand there naked in the sunlight and wash. The bliss of clean clothes after the mummifying effect of eight days of ever closer, smellier and dirtier confinement has to be experienced to be fully appreciated.

Then came the business of shaving a week's matted growth of beard. This was far from pleasant. The water that was pumped out from below the desert back at Sidi Barrani or Matruh was as hard and unyielding to soap as a piece of chalk. It was almost impossible to produce a lather, and shaving was a matter of hacking through the undergrowth with a succession of blades. Our skin, too, was cracked and tender from the dry, bitter winds and the extremes of temperature fluctuating between mid-day's heat and midnight's freeze.

The whole operation of washing-up had to be carefully organized in the prevailing scarcity of water. After the stand-up bath and shave it was the turn of our cast-off clothing, which we filled with soapy water as best we could and pulverized on the nearest rock. Thereafter the desert scrub bloomed with fantastic patterns of clothing of various hues and dimensions. Any high-soaring reconnaissance pilot would have had some bewildering pictures to decipher had he passed overhead that morning.

Always last to enjoy any of the rare relaxations that came our way were the tank drivers. At night, when the tanks stood in their mute rows and the crews were silent in sleep and exhaustion, grimy drivers would be seen going over the engines and tracks. In the morning's darkness they would be the first up to get their Honeys ready for the move. Their personal battle consisted in keeping their tanks mobile. An immobile tank could mean death for all. It was reasonable, no doubt, that they should have last

access to the water and soap and towels: they were always covered in grease and oil and an abrasive amalgam of sand.

By midday the battalion was washed. The psychological magic of it moved us right out of the desert and its battles into some oasis of the mind in which just being able to wash and change our underclothes produced as complete a metamorphosis as being suddenly transposed to breakfast in bed in a luxury hotel with some beautiful shape filling the blankets alongside with delicious convolutions. Most of us would have settled just for the breakfast in bed.

I unrolled my valise and sleeping bag, picking out the odd bits of shrapnel that always found their way in, and lay down in the sun on my back. All round, the desert was full of leisure and relaxation and the war was far, far away. We could just hear its distant rumbles where the struggle to open the corridor to Tobruk was in progress.

Lying flat on their stomachs or propped up on one elbow, torsos naked, all the troops seemed to be writing letters:

"Dear Lil, There hasn't been much time for letters lately. I'm not allowed to tell you where we are but I've just been washing the *sand* out of my hair, the first wash for eight days. Blimey, the smell. Poor old Herb copped it the other day. I suppose his folks know by now. I helped to dig the hole. . . ."

My crew spent some time discussing plans for lunch. We settled for some bully beef pudding, a precious can of potatoes, tinned pears and condensed milk, and hot tea. I watched them making the pastry by crushing up biscuits to a fine powder, adding water and kneading it into dough. This they wrapped around the unbroken chunk of bully and placed it into one of the desert ovens they were adept at making out of sand and tin. We lay there savouring the strange smell of cooking, the saliva of anticipation trickling round our mouths. As soon as the food was hot, we ate it. A meal only needed to be hot to be different and wonderful. It felt like some long-forgotten picnic on the sands. Only the happy noise of children was missing.

C.O.'s orders were at 1.30. I rubbed the scanty aftermath of the meal off the plates in the clean sand and strolled over with Mae-graith to the Colonel's tank. There we were delighted to see again the familiar face and figure of Doc MacMillan, the Medical Officer, who had disappeared with the C.O.'s staff car in the general confusion of Sidi Rezegh and Rommel's dash to The Wire. Mac, after

Calais and Greece, was something of a regimental institution, and we did not want to lose him.

The Colonel told us that twelve new Honeys were coming up for us that afternoon with Cyril Joly, who, at that time, was commanding our "B" Echelon party but later came to my squadron. Years after, he was to write a very fine novel about the desert war. The new arrivals would bring the strength of the battalion up to 22 tanks which would be reorganized as follows: Headquarters troop, 3 tanks; "A" Squadron, 9 tanks; "C" Squadron, 10 tanks. "And 'C' Squadron," said the Colonel, "will be commanded by Captain Crisp."

I felt like a two-and-a-half stripe naval officer being given his first frigate. I knew it would only last until our other two squadrons with their more senior officers rejoined, but I was delighted at the opportunity and the demonstration of confidence. Maegraith was obviously very pleased, and I immediately appointed him temporary, acting, unpaid second-in-command. Our moment of glory was destined to be brief.

In the early afternoon we moved to Bir Berraneb, the favourite leaguering and mustering area of the brigade, where the newly-arrived Honeys were apportioned to the battalions. Cyril Joly came over with a flock of a dozen of them, and while the technical sergeant and his men inspected them and the new crews checked guns and equipment, the officers concentrated on the Mess lorry, which had made its first appearance of the campaign and in which we found a crate of beer that had somehow survived the war and the mad to-and-fro rushes across the desert. It made the atmosphere of holiday complete.

The supply story of the Crusader Operation would need a separate book to do it full justice in all its aspects. Every "B" Echelon, setting off from the rear areas in its daily or nightly search for the rendezvous with its fighting echelon, had its regular encounter with the unexpected. The previous night our own replenishment column had failed to arrive, and Joly gave us the first news of what had happened to it.

It had set off from base with the rest of the Brigade transport on its routine night run to the leaguering area. In the darkness it had gone off its bearing, and had become completely detached from the other echelons. In the leading vehicle the officer in command had wisely decided not to risk his hunches and to stay where he was for the night, since the whole area was full of German columns

swarming towards the frontier in the tracks of the panzer regiments. At first light he lined his truck on a bearing that he hoped would take him to the brigade leaguer, formed the convoy nose-to-tail behind him and set off into the gathering light. All round him he could see other vehicle convoys, some stationary where the night had held them captive, others moving eastwards. There was no way of telling friend from enemy, but he was able to console himself with the thought that everybody was in the same predicament and there was no reason why he should be any more frightened of them than they were of him.

Three armoured cars came up alongside the column out of the half-light, and moved parallel with it about a hundred yards on the flank. They took no other action; the officer in the truck accepted that they were friendly and felt reassured and grateful for their escort. Then one of the armoured cars moved forward across the front of the convoy, whose commander gave a cheery wave to the man poking out of the top of the turret. The man gave him a cheery wave back, and then rather surprisingly halted the armoured car slap in the path of the leading truck. The driver jammed on the brakes; the officer leaned out of the side door and was just about to let go a few well-chosen phrases when he saw the turret swinging steadily round until he found himself looking straight down the muzzles of an assortment of guns. The man on top of the armoured car grinned down and said gutturally: "Good morning. You are surprised to see me, yes?" And put the whole convoy in the bag.

We finished the beer while we listened to Cyril Joly and his description of the big flap of the previous day, to go down in the history of the Eighth Army as the Matruh Stakes. Dusk was falling, and war was present only in the distant rumble of gunfire away to the north-west.

With most of us belching merrily, the C.O. gave us the latest gen from Brigade, most of which seemed to be good. We went back to our tanks replete, refreshed and reassured—quietly happy in the knowledge that the war was being won without any undue risk to ourselves. We stayed awake long enough to hear the B.B.C. nine o'clock news, and went peacefully to sleep—much too peacefully for my well-tried philosophy that every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

TENTH DAY

WHEN the message came round after morning dispersal that all squadron commanders were to attend a brigade conference at 0900 hours, it took a few minutes before I realized it was meant for me. I pulled Maegraith's leg a bit over a leisurely breakfast in which our two tank crews had joined forces in preparing something as near as we could get to a traditional eggs and bacon, toast and tea. Without the eggs.

"You'll be in command while I'm away, Harry. Senior officers' conference. Good opportunity for you youngsters to show your worth. Don't make a balls-up of the washing-up while I'm away."

Alec Gatehouse met us at his command tank. He was as usual imperturbable, solidly impressive, full of an inspiring self-confidence. Briefly he put us in the picture: 7th Armoured Brigade had gone back to railhead; 22nd Armoured had spent a day salvaging tanks and brought its strength up to 42; 4th Armoured, thanks to the recent reinforcements and the stragglers which were coming in in dribs and drabs, totalled 77 Honeys—so that the 119 tanks of various shapes and sizes of the two brigades represented the total armoured strength of 30 Corps, which had begun the battle nine days before with about 600 tanks.

Then came the real stop press news . . . General Cunningham had been relieved of his command of the Eighth Army, and had been replaced by General Ritchie. This was a shock to all of us, but not really a surprise. Even right down at the bottom of the ladder, it was impossible not to be aware of the absence of firm direction and purpose from above. Everybody welcomed the change as the beginning of an era of greater decisiveness. Nobody had ever heard of Ritchie.

With revived hope and interest, we turned to the maps laid out ready for the conference. Gatehouse quickly jabbed out the battle positions with his finger, while his crisp voice explained the crayonned formations and dispositions. We were only vaguely interested in the situation on the frontier, as it was generally accepted that Rommel couldn't be serious in his adventures in that area (we were wrong), and that the decision would still have to be fought out south of Tobruk . . . with us.

The Brigadier's black-haired finger traversed in one jump the

embattled desert between The Wire and the Tobruk perimeter, translating the thunder and smoke of the previous evening into the rings and arrows of the British capture of the Ed Duda feature by the sortie from Tobruk. The New Zealanders were at Bel-hamed, separated from the garrison by a few miles and a mixed German and Italian force. The corridor into Tobruk would soon be opened and the long siege raised.

Rommel's panzer divisions were on their way back from our rear areas, having had a pretty rough time of it, though nobody knew whether they were in retreat and trying to break out to the west or rushing back to restore the position at Sidi Rezegh, which was now again dominated by the British. Orders issued by the Eighth Army plainly indicated their uncertainty of the enemy intentions. 4th Armoured Brigade had been given two alternative rôles for the immediate future. The first was to stay in the area we now occupied, prepared to engage any enemy column within a radius of 30 miles; the second was to be ready to advance to a battle position south of Acroma away to the west of the battle area. The second plan meant clearly that Rommel would be pulling out beaten. It was a nice thought, but we didn't believe it. Not yet. But it would make good telling to the tired tank crews. We were all getting to the stage where a few straws to grab hold of came in handy.

Back at the squadron I found that new officers and crews had come up with the replenishment vehicles, and after I had given out the gen, the morning was spent reorganizing tank crews and rushing through drill and troop tactics. One young officer assigned to "C" Squadron had arrived in the Middle East from England only seven days before. I told him that the main thing I wanted him to do when we got into a scrap was to conform to my movements—keep up alongside me and make the troop keep up alongside him. Then I told them the few imperative do's and don'ts which I had already discovered were essential to survival in tank warfare.

I was in the middle of showing them elementary troop movements with a few pebbles in the sand when my wireless operator yelled: "Sir! The C.O. wants you urgently." I ran across to the Honey, where the operator handed me down earphones and mike. It was an order for the whole brigade to move north-east to the Trigh Capuzzo to assist 22nd Armoured in an attack on an enemy column of 2,000 vehicles, including 50 to 60 tanks. I passed on the

orders to the tank commanders grouped conveniently nearby, and told them to get mounted and start up. It looked like another mad charge, and my parting words to the new boys were: "Listen. This is your first battle. It will probably end up in complete confusion. Keep your eyes on my Honey all the time. Know where it is all the time and conform to its movements. We'll move up to that ridge line abreast. Stay turret-down—not hull-down, turret-down—until I give the signal to move. Got it? O.K. See you at suppertime."

Officers and crews ran over to their tanks, and soon the air was filled with the roaring of engines as the drivers started up and revved the radials. I had split my ten Honeys into three troops of three with Maegraith in command of one and the two new officers leading the others. As we ran up the long slope of the ridge I saw the tanks spread out on either side of me in a long straight line with about 40 yards between each vehicle. Well over on my left "A" Squadron were beginning the same manœuvre, while beyond them, and out of our vision, 5th Tanks would be doing something similar—and so right along the ridge flanking the Trigh Capuzzo to the furthermost Crusader of 22nd Armoured Brigade, whose job it was to hit the head of the German column while we climbed into the flank and rear.

As my Honey edged up to the final crest I was immediately aware of the dense throng of transport in front of me. The Trigh was black and broad and moving with packed trucks and lorries. Over it all hung a thick, drifting fog of dust so that only the nearest stream of vehicles was clearly discernible. There was not a panzer in sight. The tail of the enemy column was just on our right front, and it looked as though we could not have timed it better. The Germans gave no sign of having seen us, or of being aware of our tanks poised for the strike within a thousand yards of them. They moved slowly westwards wondering, no doubt, what the devil Rommel thought he was playing at with these mad rushes up and down the desert, and beefing like hell about the dust.

I looked approvingly to right and left, where the rest of the squadron were lined up following the curve of the contour. From each turret top poked the head and shoulders of the commander, eyes glued to binoculars trained on that enemy mass. It must have been quite a sight to somebody only a week out from base camp in England. I got on the air to the C.O. with a quick, formal announcement that "C" Squadron was in position and ready.

From my left the other squadron did the same. Within a minute the reply came: "Hullo JAGO, JAGO calling. Attack now. Alec sends a special message 'Go like hell and good luck'. Good luck from me too. JAGO to JAGO, off."

The order went through all the intercoms, from commander to crew: "Driver, advance. Speed up. Gunner load both guns." The Honeys positively leapt over the top of the ridge and plunged down the steady incline to the Trigh. I knew my driver, who was getting used to this sort of thing, would have his foot hard down on the accelerator, straining his eyes through the narrow slit before him to avoid the sudden outcrops of rock or the slit trenches that littered this oft-contested terrain. On each side the Honeys were up level with me. That was good. My wrist-watch showed 1 o'clock as I gripped hard on the edge of the cupola and pressed back against the side to ride the bucking tank.

We were half-way down the slope and going like bats out of hell in the bright sunlight before the Jerries realized what was happening. Then the familiar pattern of alarm and confusion and panic-flight away from us at right angles to the road. There was no slackening of speed, and within another minute we had hit the soft sand of the well-worn desert highway and become absorbed into the cloud of dust and that frightened herd of vehicles stampeding blindly northwards.

I had the same intention in my mind as on a previous occasion —to go right through them, turn about and cut off as many as possible, shooting up everything that tried to get past. I put the mike close to my lips and told my tank commanders briefly to start shooting. My own gunner pulled the trigger immediately and within seconds the dust was full of the criss-cross pattern of tracers drawing red lines through the yellow cloud and puncturing the fleeing dark shapes with deadly points. From the turret tops we let go with tommy-guns and revolvers, and every now and again the whip-crack of the 37-mm. interjected the staccato chatter of the Brownings. I could still see a Honey or two racing alongside, but what was happening beyond the narrow limits of vision I could only guess. And my guess was that the whole squadron was there. Another minute perhaps, I thought, and then I would give the order to turn about.

Suddenly, through the dust, I saw the flat plane of the ground disappear into space. I yelled like mad at the driver to halt. He had seen the danger only a fraction of a second after I had, and

jerked back on the brakes even while I was shouting at him. The tracks locked fast and tore up sand, rock and scrub in a brief and frantic tussle to stop the momentum of the tank. We skidded to a violent stop with the front sprockets hanging over a sharp drop that started the descent of a steep escarpment.

The first thing I saw, through popping eyes, ten yards in front and below me, was a motor-cycle combination lying on its side with three German soldiers standing stiffly at attention in a row beside it, their backs towards me and their hands stretched high above their heads. I rejected immediately a quick impulse to shoot them. While my mind was still trying to absorb this apparition I became aware of the astonishing scene at the foot of the escarpment, where it levelled out into a broad wadi. Vehicles of all shapes and sizes were everywhere—some upright and still moving away as fast as they could; others stationary and bewildered; many lying on their sides or backs with wheels poking grotesquely upwards. Dark figures of men darted wildly about.

Even as I watched, a great lorry went plunging down the escarpment out of control; it struck some outcrop and leapt high into the air, somersaulting to the bottom in a fantastic avalanche of earth, rock and scrub and odd-shaped bundles of men integrated with jagged pieces of wood and metal. The concentration of transport in the wadi below was a wonderful target. I said quickly into the mouthpiece: "Both guns. Men and vehicles. Fire with everything you've got."

The bullets went zipping inches above the heads of the three immovable figures in front of the tank. They never twitched a muscle. When the 37-mm. cannon suddenly went off they jumped involuntarily, but none of them turned their heads or gave any indication that I could see of fear or curiosity. They just stood there, three backs and three pairs of arms while the tracers went streaming in flat, straight lines into the dusty turmoil below. I wondered idly where the rest of the Honeys were, and if they were having as good a time as mine was.

Suddenly there was a fearful bang, and simultaneously I was drenched from head to foot in an astonishing cascade of cold water. For a moment or two I was physically and mentally paralysed. I just could not believe that anything like that could happen. Then realization came swiftly and terribly . . . the water tins on the back of the tank had been hit. It could mean only one thing. As I looked backwards I was already giving the order to the

gunner to traverse the turret as fast as he bloody well could. In one comprehensive flash I saw it all, and the fear leapt up in me. Not fifty yards away a 50-mm. anti-tank gun pointed straight at the Honey, pointed straight between my eyes. Beyond it were other guns and then as the dust drifted over the scarp the sight I had dreaded most—a number of motionless Honeys and the huddled figures of black-bereted men crouched on the sand or stretched out in the agony of death.

It took less than a second for the whole scene and its awful meaning to register in my mind. I could see the German gunners slamming the next shell into the breech as the turret whirled. I yelled "On. Machine gun. Fire." In the same moment I saw the puff of smoke from the anti-tank gun and felt and heard the strike on the armour-plating. Quickly I looked down into the turret. A foot or two below me the gunner was staring at his hand, over which a dark red stain was slowly spreading. Then he gave a scream and fell grovelling on the floor. In the top right-hand corner of the turret a jagged hole gaped, and through it, like some macabre peepshow, I could see the gun being reloaded. I knew that in another few seconds I would be dead, but something well beyond reason or sanity impelled my muscles and actions.

I leaned down and pulled the trigger, and kept my finger there until the gun jammed. God knows where the bullets went. Twice I felt the Honey shudder and the second time more water came pouring in. When the Browning stopped and my mind leapt about searching for some way to stay alive I suddenly saw the slim chance. If the tank would move at all, and we could drop over the edge of the escarpment, we would be out of sight of those blasted anti-tank guns. I could see them framed in that jagged hole, the gunners working feverishly, their faces strained and vicious. I said urgently into the mike: "Driver, advance. Over the edge. Quick!"

Nothing. I thought "My God, Whaley's had it. We've all had it," and screamed down into the turret "Driver, advance. For Christ's sake advance!" Then I saw what had happened. In falling, the gunner had jerked back on the intercom leads to the driver's earphones. The cords had tightened round his neck, pulling him backwards over the driving seat and half-strangling him. He wrestled frantically with his earphones and ripped them off. He didn't need them to hear my panic bellowing.

I felt the gears engage, and for a split second the world stood still. Then the engine revved, and the Honey heaved forward

and dropped with a violent crash over the escarpment. In the turret we were hurled about like corks, and then the bouncing stopped and we rode smoothly down the slope. We were out of sight of the guns on top of the escarpment, and with a great rush of disbelief I knew we were going to get away with it. The three German motor-cyclists still stood motionless. The tank could not have missed them by more than a few inches, yet they still had their hands in the air. Down in the driving compartment Whaley was wrestling with the sticks to keep the tank on a diagonal course that would take him to the bottom of the slope away from the enemy. When the ground levelled out a bit I ordered him to turn right to run into a little wadi that offered a safe way out to the south. We were travelling with the turret back to front, and I prodded the operator with my foot as he bent over the prostrate gunner and indicated to him that I wanted the turret traversed back to the normal position. While he was turning the handle I could not resist a last backward look at those three men. Incredibly, they were still standing as we had left them. I began to think they had become literally petrified with fright and would stay there down the centuries in some miraculous monument.

So much had happened in a few minutes, or a few hours it might have been, and I had looked so closely into the valley of the shadow, that I found it difficult to return to reality. I just could not fully absorb our situation. I had to grip the hardness of the armour-plating and see the familiar figures of the tank crew to realize that we were still alive, and that we were going to stay alive. The gunner lay there groaning in pain and sobbing in fear. There was nothing much wrong with him, and I shouted at him roughly to pull himself together. My thoughts went out to the rest of the squadron. Where were they? What had happened to them? Were they all dead? It was something I had to find out.

We were chugging along casually through the deserted silence of the wadi. It was uncanny after the tumult and terror just behind us, and the thought kept on intruding that we were no longer on earth, that we were driving in some ghost tank on another level of existence . . . that we were all dead. When I put the mouthpiece to my lips I was half-prepared to hear no voice come out. The unreality persisted when the Honey swung right in response to my order, and moved slowly up the slope to the crest. As soon as my eyes were above the lip of the escarpment we halted, and the full picture of horror burst on me immediately.

Not much more than 500 yards away, like a projection on a cinema screen, lay the battlefield. My eyes lifted to the tall black columns, leaning slightly with the wind, and followed them down to the Honeys gasping smoke. Four of my tanks were blazing infernos; three others just sat there, sad and abandoned. A line of anti-tank guns with their crews still manning them expectantly, lined the edge of the drop. The whole scene was silhouetted sharply against the yellow clouds of dust which rose in a thick fog from the wadi below. I could see many men running about between guns and tanks and vehicles. My heart ached as I picked out the familiar bereted figures of our own troops, huddled in disconsolate groups or being shepherded singly by gesticulating Germans.

Was there nothing I could do? My mind moved round the prospect of a sudden charge into that line of anti-tank guns, over-running them before they could get their sights on me. If I had had a gunner to fire the Browning, perhaps I might have. As it was I was grateful for the opportunity of rejecting it as impossible, and so prolonging my life and those of my crew. But who knows? It might have come off.

As a concession to my own great distress and impotency I stood up on the turret and waved my beret. There was a chance that some gunner, operator or driver, one of the commanders perhaps, might have been lying crouched in the scrub, waiting for the night or the unbidden moment to make a break for it. But it was more of a gesture of complete despair, and when I heard the whishing past my ears, followed by the quick barking of the machine-guns, I dropped back into the turret. I said wearily over the intercom: "O.K., Whaley. There's nothing we can do. Let's go back."

We followed the wadi southwards as it grew shallower and shallower, eventually disgorging us unobtrusively on to the plateau over which we had charged so bravely . . . when? ten minutes ago? an hour ago? today? yesterday? and how many lives ago? My wrist-watch was staring me in the face as we paused on the rim of the depression. The hands pointed to 17 minutes past one. 17 minutes.

In the middle distance I saw something moving through the scrub. It was a Honey, and I steered Whaley towards it. Soon, its commander spotted me and altered course to come alongside. Unbelievably I recognized Harry Maegraith in the turret. He jumped down and ran across.

"Bob, I'm bloody sorry. I got a petrol stoppage half-way down the slope. I saw you all disappearing into those Jerries. What's happened?"

Incoherently, fighting the emotion that filled my chest and throat, I tried to tell him the story of the past few minutes. The words gushed out violently, bringing with them as I recreated the scene a full realization of its meaning. Uncontrollable sobs tore my sentences into barely articulate phrases.

"Where are all the other tanks? They should have been up there. Where are they?"

"They didn't go in with you, Bob. They were swanning about on the road the last time I saw them."

"The bastards. The mucking bastards." I beat the hard armour plating with my fists. Harry, standing beside me, slipped his arm around my shoulders.

"Take it easy, Bob. Take it easy," he said, gently. "Are you sure you feel all right? There's blood all over your face."

It was a surprising bit of information, and I passed a hand across my forehead to feel the gritty lines of dried blood.

"I'm all right. It must be somebody else's. My gunner is hit. We'd better get him back. There's nothing we can do here."

We moved off together, back across the Trigh and up the long slope. I could not shake off the black mood of anger and despair. On the crest of the ridge I saw the silhouette of a tank and veered towards it. As I drew closer I noticed that its 37-mm. was firing to the north at short intervals, and that its barrel was poked up at an angle of at least 30 degrees. There was no target in sight that I could see; just the big cloud of dust above the invisible escarpment.

From the turret top another Squadron commander was staring through his binoculars, following the high parabola of the shell. He was smoking a pipe. It was the pipe that did it. I told my driver to pull up alongside and as we edged abreast I screamed abuse over the intervening few yards.

"You mucking bastard. You sit there smoking your bloody pipe while my whole squadron's been wiped out. Wiped out, d'you hear? Killed. All of them. See that smoke going up there? Those are Honeys burning. And crews frying. Where are your bloody tanks? Pissing about on the Trigh Capuzzo. Look at that barrel. What are you shooting at—mucking aeroplanes? . . ."

I went on at him while he stared back at me mouth half-open in bewilderment. I heard the sentences ending abruptly as I ran out

of breath, and realized suddenly that with the earphones on he could not hear a word. It came to me dimly that later I would be glad that he had not. But I recognized the half-ashamed look on his face as I pulled alongside, and I think he knew that he deserved what I was saying, even if he couldn't hear it. I yelled one final expletive at him and then ordered the driver to advance.

On the way back to battalion H.Q., I asked for the M.O. and an ambulance to be handy for the gunner. As we approached the little cluster of H.Q. tanks a group of officers and N.C.O.s headed by the colonel and Dr. MacMillan walked out to meet me. My driver pulled up about thirty yards from them and I jumped down to run across, the shocked words already bursting on my lips. To my great astonishment I tripped on my first step, and half-fell on to my hands, becoming conscious for the first time of a burning pain in my right foot. I looked down briefly and saw the slit in the toe of my desert boots. But I was too full of other things to think again about it. Surrounded by the H.Q. group I blurted out the hysterical story while the Doc and his orderlies went over to remove the gunner.

The C.O. calmed me with his usual understanding and decency, and then Mac came back and took me off to his truck. He told me the gunner had not been badly wounded . . . flesh wounds in the hand and thigh. He gave me a cup of hot, strong tea, very sweet, and then took off my boot and sock. From my big toe I was startled to see a shining piece of metal protruding, about the size of a marble. He pulled this out with a pair of forceps, washed out the hole and bound it up.

"Now," he said, "Let's have a look at your head."

He went through my hair carefully. Every now and then there would be a little pinging noise and he would locate it with the tweezers and pull out a tiny piece of lead shaving. I could not get rid of my mood. I could not rid my mind of those burning Honeyes and the disconsolate survivors and the young officers who would never be able to write home: "Dear Mother, I was in action for the first time today...."

For a few minutes I broke down completely. The doctor, who knew shock when he saw it, wisely left me alone. Then I washed in a basin of cold water while he poured a jug full of it over my head, and the worst of it was over. I began to think a little more clearly, not of what had just happened but whether there was anything to be done about it. Mac offered to let me spend the

night in the comfort of the ambulance, but the thought stayed with me that some of those tank crews might have been able to sneak off into the desert and would be expecting me to do something about them. And there was my own crew to think about.

I limped back to the Honey. It was surrounded by the H.Q. personnel, questioning the driver and operator and inspecting the damage. It was quite an impressive sight. The water cans and outside equipment were a mangled mess. There were six holes in various parts of the armour plating. It looked, and was, a miracle of survival.

While we had been engaged down on the escarpment, the missing squadron that had been away since the Sidi Rezegh battle had rejoined the battalion, and was just about to be sent out with "A" Squadron on another attack farther along at Trigh Capuzzo. My Honey, though draughty, was still battleworthy, and I was immediately confronted with one of those little moments of decision which can have such far-reaching results. There was no doubt that I could have got out of the battle that evening. If I had done so it was possible that I would not have wanted to come back. I asked the C.O. if there was a spare gunner about the place. He said there was none, but more reinforcements of tanks and men might be coming up that night. I said to my driver and operator, who were just as much concerned in the moment as myself: "Come on then. We'll go without a gunner."

The three of us climbed happily aboard, and I could tell by the looks on their faces that they were glad I had made the decision for them.

Tucked in behind the other squadrons, our Honey moved off west along the Trigh, but my eyes were strained always northwards in the hope of seeing the stray figures that would have been some of my tank crews. Where the ground rose on the right I could see the flashes of German or Italian field-guns and reported them back automatically. Harry Maegraith was hovering protectively near; and with no menace developing, we gained reassurance from the reddening sky and the darkness creeping over the desert behind us. At 5 o'clock we were recalled to H.Q. for replenishment from the lorries which had just arrived and the active day was over.

When night was old enough to obscure our movements, we all moved three miles to the south to what was becoming a familiar leaguer area. There I asked the Colonel's permission to make a

patrol at first light to see if I could pick up any of my troops who had managed to get away in the night. He gave a limited approval—I was not to go beyond the Trigh Capuzzo and I was not on any account to get out of wireless touch. It was a case of yesterday is past; there is still tomorrow.

Before I rolled up in my blankets Mac came along to give me a good slug of brandy and two pills to produce the oblivion I needed.

That night, a few miles away across the desert, an officer of the German Artillery Regiment 33 was writing in the regimental War Diary:

"A group of enemy tanks attacked the supply vehicles in the rear of the division. They burst right into the middle of the column and fired shells and machine-gun bullets into the vehicles, which were pushing forward at full speed. Battarien 6 and 8 immediately swung their guns round, but the dust was so thick they could see nothing until suddenly an enemy tank appeared in a cloud of dust about 50 metres in front of the gun positions of Batterie 6. We immediately opened up over open sights. The tank burst into flames. Another tank just behind it was knocked out. In a very short time the Batterie destroyed 10 more enemy tanks at point blank range, and thus beat off the attack on the division's rear."

ELEVENTH DAY

IN the night they took away my battered tank. By the time I had been shaken into wakefulness at first light Maegraith had reorganized my own crew and the rest of the squadron with the reinforcements that had come up with the rations and petrol. "C" Squadron was now five tanks strong, including mine and Maegraith's. I had a quick word with the new crews, a few of whom were from the battalion's regular reserve pool, and then Harry and I set off towards the Trigh Capuzzo.

The top of the sky was bright, but the earth stayed as sombre as my mood as we reached the edge of the nearest escarpment. I was not at all sure of my position in relation to the previous afternoon's events, but from the crest of the ridge we commanded a wide view to the north. The desert lay silent and empty before us as we probed the scrub and rock with the binoculars, eager

for the little movement or the patch of khaki that would reveal a man. It stared back at us blankly.

Directly below us the highway of tracks stretched dark and deserted, linking the horizons. Up and down the crest we ran, hoping that by noise and movement we would attract the attention of any stray troopers skulking in the fear of uncertainty. The noise of the radial engines was as distinct from the rumbling beat of the Diesels as a xylophone from a double bass. The encroaching light lit up all the plateau, but gave us no glimpse of the aftermath of yesterday's battle, and I realized that we must be several miles west of where we had begun our descent to disaster. The C.O.'s voice interrupted my contemplation of the next decision, recalling us urgently to H.Q.

On the run back we were attracted by a little cluster of Honeyes encircling several mounds thrown up from a group of slit trenches. Full of curiosity we trundled over, and I recognized the tanks as belonging to 5 Royal Tank Regiment. From their hesitancy I thought there must be at least one concealed anti-tank gun and a mine-field in those mounds, but as I drove up alongside the slit trenches all I found in the bottom of each one was a terrified German infantryman. I beckoned to them to come out, which they did with white faces, upraised arms and very obvious relief. I passed them over to the 5th Tanks, made a rude gesture with my fingers at the troop commander and carried on back to the battalion.

Back at H.Q. we learnt that a column of lorried infantry was reported to be forming up four miles to the north-west. We had been ordered to attack it. I swanned off with my five-tank squadron, shedding my depression in the contemplation of renewed action, obliterating the past once again by over-crowding the present. My troop had just crossed the Trigh when we ran slap into a number of scattered enemy vehicles and troops that seemed to appear from nowhere without very much idea of anywhere to go.

Immediately the Honeyes came under fire from several anti-tank guns mounted on the backs of trucks. At the same moment the C.O. came on the air to tell us to move fast on a completely different bearing westwards to give assistance to 22nd Armoured Brigade, who were engaging M.E.T. and tanks. I could not disengage from the brisk little battle that had developed all round us. Once you are entangled with anti-tank guns you have to go

on with everything you've got until one or the other is eliminated. All five of my tanks were blazing away with their Brownings; within a minute or two the Jerries had had enough, and were pulling out with ourselves in full pursuit.

I had a hectic chase after one truck which was bouncing all over the uneven surface as it fled, with the men on the back swaying wildly and firing their gun desperately every few seconds. My own machine-gun fire seemed to be equally inaccurate, and finally I told the driver to halt and the gunner to fire the cannon. We were only 50 yards away; and as I did not see the shot strike, it must have been the noise that frightened the truck driver into a swerving halt. The occupants jumped down on to the sand in surrender.

Suddenly the whole desert seemed to be swarming with little groups of Germans anxious to give themselves up. The other Honeys clattered around like broody hens collecting little coveys of the Afrika Korps. Soon the armour-plating of the tanks was completely camouflaged by the dark figures of men. It presented me with a pretty little problem. I had been given my orders, but by this time the rest of the battalion was out of sight and I had only the vaguest idea where it was. I could not contact the Colonel on the set, and I could hardly go charging into a tank v. tank battle with the Honeys festooned with Germans. I decided to try to locate Brigade headquarters, off-load the prisoners and get a proper bearing to where the battle was being fought.

After a few minutes' run we picked out the package of tanks and vehicles denoting Brigade some miles to the south. When we halted just outside the area I made all the prisoners line up in a double column. The Brigadier himself came over to see me looking, I thought, very cross. He glanced casually at the prisoners and then asked me what the hell I thought I was doing swanning round the desert picking up bodies when I should be with the battalion fighting tanks.

I was half-expecting a raspberry, but it was hardly fair in the circumstances. I pointed out that most of the prisoners were anti-tank gunners, that we had knocked out four anti-tank guns, and I did not like the idea of leaving all those men free to knock us out the next day or the day after that.

"Who knows?" I said. "One of these chaps here may have knocked out your own tank by this time tomorrow."

I think he saw my point, and when I asked him for my battalion

position he told me that the situation was a bit confused and that I'd better stick around until he knew more of what was happening. Somebody came rushing over to tell Gatehouse that he could see a number of enemy tanks approaching from the north. Glad of the interruption and of the opportunity of getting away from there I collected my five Honeys and we left in a hurry.

A dozen tanks of various sizes were moving slowly along the Trigh in a small packet from the west. I guessed that they had been sent back to see what had happened to the group we had run into earlier. There was no chance of finding any cover. The desert between us was as flat as a salt-pan. As soon as they saw the Honeys they adopted their usual tactics of sending out a screen of light tanks, and about half a dozen Mark IIs came swarming out to meet us. There was nothing we could do about it except stay where we were, waiting for the right range to take a crack at them. This lack of reaction seemed to disconcert the German tank commanders, for they slowed down in uncertainty and then came to an irresolute halt.

I wasn't looking for a battle on terms of two to one, including a number of Mark IIIs and IVs, so we just sat there hoping that they would sheer off and leave Brigade alone. Then the light tanks must have got some pretty blistering instructions, for they suddenly came forward again, though a good deal more cautiously, and with their guns puffing ineffectual smoke at us.

The Honeys stayed silent until the Jerries were about 600 yards away; then I said into the mike "O.K. Get cracking." The 37-mms blazed into action, and within a few seconds I was overjoyed to see two panzers come to a stop and the crews bale out. Then the shelling started from the bigger tanks in the rear. For the time being we ignored this as we kept moving slightly to and fro across the front of the light tanks, who had pressed on to about 600 yards and then decided they had had enough. From one of these a slow wreath of smoke drifted, and I saw the driver leap out of the front, but no turret opened.

Then the big panzers came crunching towards us, and the shell fire from the Mark IV's big guns was being aimed directly at our Honeys. I wasn't going to wait until we came within range of the 50-mm. armour-piercing shell of the Mark IIIs, and I ordered the troop commanders to pull back slowly. They knew the form. The drivers went into reverse, and we backed away, firing all the time.

100 yards on my left I saw a Honey come to a stop with one of its tracks dangling shattered and useless over the front sprocket. Three of the crew spilled out of the turret and crouched down behind the engine. I waved to them to run over, and then concentrated again on the approaching panzers. When I looked again the disabled Honey was a good 200 yards away, and the crew had not moved from its protection. One of them waved to me and again I signalled to them to make a run for it. I thought briefly of the brigade order about picking up crews. I couldn't risk the tank, and I was supposed to set an example. I couldn't understand why they just sat there, unwilling to risk the bullets and shells in the face of certain capture.

Things were getting pretty hot for the remaining Honeys, and I knew that my own tank had been hit several times. I did not know what to do if the panzers kept on coming forward. I looked over my shoulder and saw the Brigade H.Q. vehicles clustered where we had left them, a couple of miles away but already coming within range of the Mark IVs. All we could do, I decided, was to carry on as we were in the hope that something would happen that was outside our own control.

We moved slowly back, red tracers streaking towards the enemy, aware of the death cleaving the air about us. The panzers moved forward, conforming to our withdrawal but not pressing us, apparently just as lacking in enthusiasm as we were. Soon their intentions became clear. The big tanks were concerned with recovering their own casualties and the crew of the Honey, and had no offensive design beyond that. Through binoculars I saw the dispirited troopers slouch over to a big Mark IV and clamber on to the back. For a minute or two everything stayed motionless, then the panzers started pulling back in twos and threes, leaving a watchful screen behind them. The last few light tanks darted back . . . the battle was over.

We went back, just the four of us, to Brigade where Gatehouse and some of his staff officers had been watching the whole performance through their binoculars. I had a quick look round the outside of the Honey and then, still smarting a little over the morning's rebuke, went over to the brigadier's group. Full of righteousness, I said: "I reckon we've just saved your headquarters from being over-run."

Gatehouse said: "You were fighting at pretty long range, weren't you?"

"If you think that was long range, sir, go and have a look at my tank."

I took them over to the Honeys and led them round, pointing out the holes in the armour-plating, in the toolboxes, in the bedding rolls, and the 30-mm. shell embedded in the front plate.

"Six bloody holes in my tank . . . even at long range."

There was no further comment, and when I asked for a bearing back to the battalion Alec Gatehouse, friendly again, told me that he had ordered 3rd and 5th Tanks to rally back, and that they would be coming in soon.

Doc MacMillan was at Brigade H.Q., which formed a rendezvous when a battle was on for all those not actively engaged in the fighting. He came over with Harry Maegraith, after attending to one of our wounded. Doc said: "Well done, Bob. Last night I told the C.O. I thought it would be a good idea if you had a short rest. I was wrong."

I knew what he meant, and how much it meant. He appreciated the little personal crisis I had survived. Now that it was over it was as though a curtain had been drawn across a corner of my mind. Yesterday, with all its horror and shock, had disappeared in the past.

The rest of the battalion, minus three more Honeys lost in the morning's encounter, came back about noon. 8th Hussars were still out keeping an eye on the enemy forces now reported to be withdrawing north-west. During the lunch break the Colonel came round to pass on a message the brigadier had received from the new commander-in-chief. It congratulated the brigade on its splendid work, and promised that after the next task we would be rested.

In the light of events this was a rather extraordinary message. The previous night Ritchie had sent a message to 30 Corps urging that "it was of the utmost importance to prevent the enemy escaping westward, south of the Sidi Rezegh escarpment". The enemy, in fact, was not dreaming of escaping westward or in any other direction. He was concentrating his armoured divisions for the annihilation of the New Zealanders at Sidi Rezegh before they could link up with the Tobruk garrison. What we had failed to do the previous day and this day was prevent the junction of the two panzer divisions moving west from the frontier, with Ariete Division moving north from El Gubi.

We had failed not because we had suffered military defeat in

the battle, but because of the routine procedure of retiring from the scene of operations each night to a comparatively secluded leaguer. The enemy had taken full advantage of this gratuitous freedom, and by the time the British army commanders realized Rommel's intentions the concentration of his armour had been virtually completed and he was able to repulse our tank attacks while gathering his strength for the assault on the New Zealanders.

However, none of these events and intentions were apparent to the tank crews as we absorbed the warm glow of the C.-in-C.'s message. Obviously, they were not very apparent to anybody else either.

After lunch the whole of 4th Armoured moved leisurely off to the north-west, where it was to cover the right flank of the South Africans on their way up to Sidi Rezegh. An hour later we were in distant contact with a large enemy force of tanks and M.E.T. which, for some reason, we were content to shell at long range, inducing some mild retaliation. There seemed to be a universal unwillingness at that moment to start something we couldn't finish. In the night we marched interminably back to the leaguer area—due south into the open desert.

TWELFTH AND THIRTEENTH DAYS

THE "B" echelon party with our petrol, rations and ammunition failed to arrive during the night, and we had barely enough fuel to disperse at first light. It always alarmed me to think what might happen if we were caught by some stray panzer column, immobile and without ammunition for our guns. The enemy, it later transpired, was probably a good deal worse off than we were in the matter of supplies, and the war diaries of the Afrika Korps are full of references to the shortage of fuel and shells. Certainly we missed a number of glorious opportunities of inflicting damage on the enemy when he was thus handicapped—chiefly through lack of experience and the proper equipment, mental as well as material.

A patrol was sent out to find the replenishment party, and we lay around in open formation, glad of the chance to make a quick brew in spite of the shortage of petrol. The officers congregated around the C.O.'s tank in the perpetual quest for the real gen. On this morning the total tank strength of the battalion was 14,

half of "A" Squadron having gone astray somewhere the previous evening. Proper organization was impossible, and "C" Squadron was reduced to myself, Harry Maegraith, a sergeant and a corporal, with 4 Honeys.

It was obvious that as a battalion we could no longer undertake anything very significant unless reinforced, and the rest of the brigade was in very similar plight. This was appreciated in the continuing rôle of protection to the South Africans.

Things did not seem to be going too well with them. I overheard a staff officer saying to our C.O.: "Uncle George is all right, and Uncle George's boys are all right; but Uncle George's nephew is just bloody awkward. We can't get him to fight a battle, or even to move to a place where he might have to fight a battle."

After the mauling and virtual elimination of 5th S.A. Brigade at Sidi Rezegh, there was a natural reluctance to incur heavy casualties in the remaining force. It must be remembered that those Commonwealth divisions represented an extremely high proportion of the country's most valuable manpower. Very often this reluctance to incur casualties was inspired from above and not by internal and local influences. Perhaps it is as well to leave what, at the time, was a contentious subject with the comment that Dan Pienaar may have overdone the interpretation of suggestions made to him not to risk any more disasters.

It was this need for affording protection to the South Africans, combined perhaps with the intention to give us a bit of a break, that resulted in 4th Armoured being uncommitted to any decisive action for a considerable time. It was all the more strange because the campaign was entering a curious phase in which a major effort by Eighth Army, with a concentration of all its available tank strength, could have forced a decision in one all-out, conclusive battle south-east of Tobruk. Instead, the struggle went on piece-meal all over the desert, with Rommel fending off disjointed attacks while he planned the crucial moment and what he hoped would be the crucial blow. It was at this critical time that the Army commander sent a signal to Gatehouse that his task for the day was to keep open the road to the New Zealanders, to follow the South African brigade on its move towards the airfield and "keep a look-out".

Accordingly we spent a very peaceful morning looking-out and seeing nothing except the slow, spasmodic movement of the groups of South African transport along the skyline to the west. Over

the northern horizon there was much heavy gunfire interjected with the heavier crumph of bombs.

It was the first time we had become visually aware of the intensity of the air activity and of the R.A.F.'s superiority. The planes, mostly Boston bombers, came over in tight-knit packets, black against the overhang or faint and almost transparent against the blue. When they were little dots in the north they would suddenly be surrounded by dissolving satellites of ack-ack fire, and would wheel away to the right, always keeping the same unbroken formation. Slowly above the desert the tops of dirty explosions would lift, and we would hear the thud of bombs.

We dozed in the turrets or chewed ruminantly on biscuit and marmalade until late in the morning, when the crackles in the earphones gave way to the information that enemy tanks were massing to attack "friends on Sidi Rezegh" and we were to stand by to go to their assistance. All the brigade's field-guns, covered by a squadron of tanks from 5R.T.R., were sent off. We were glad it wasn't us. Boredom had become a precious thing.

By 2 o'clock the brigade was on the move northward. Within an hour we were passing through a grim-looking concentration of burnt-out vehicles, abandoned and wrecked guns and tanks, and the quick mounds of new-filled graves for which the numerous slit-trenches provided such a ready catacomb. Suddenly I recognized it as the area in which we had fought on Totensonntag—a dim nightmare of a memory, not seven days old.

3R.T.R. formed the protection on the right during this move. All the activity was on the left, thank goodness, where other elements of the brigade were in constant and violent contiguity with the Italian armour still moving up from Bir el Gubi to join the panzers.

It was the sort of fluid situation, in which, with infantry positions menaced by enemy tanks, all sorts of threats and possibilities of annihilation were liable to develop in the trench-bound mind. In that sort of situation there is very little difference between reality and imagination, and nobody ever waits to make quite sure.

Between 3 o'clock and 6 o'clock our Honeys rushed in quick succession southwards, northwards and westwards. The only reason we did not rush eastwards was that, so far as we knew, there was no British infantry in that direction for 60 miles. During these hectic alarms and excursions to rescue over-run riflemen

and gunners my Honey did not fire a single shot, nor did I see a single thing to shoot at except a curious flight of strange birds that I have never seen before or since. They came wheeling over the desert, in a very tight formation, about 20 of them, the size of pigeons but slimmer and hard-looking, and settled on a cluster of rocks about 40 yards in front of the tank. They immediately went into a stiff pose in unison, each bird acting independently but with joint design to form a picture of an outcrop of shaley rock. They had long beaks which they pointed stiffly at an angle of 45 degrees. They were surrounded by noise and movement of a sort which they could never have dreamed of, yet they never flickered an eyelid or twitched a single, rigid, grey-black feather. I was completely absorbed in this dedicated immobility and ran my Honey up to within 10 yards of them. Only at that distance did they lose their corporate pattern and become individual birds. I fired a shot from my .38 revolver into the ground beside them. They literally never blinked an eyelid. I climbed down from the turret and walked to within three yards of them. They stayed fixed in their rock-like trance. I edged forward gently until I was right above them. Twenty eyes looked at me intelligently and I began to get a queer feeling that in a few minutes I would turn into something lithic myself and spend the rest of my days out-staring those birds.

It was quite an effort to bend forward and stretch out my hand. Twenty eyes swivelled silently and simultaneously in those entranced bodies, following the movement. When my hand was about four inches from the nearest bird all of them, activated by a single purpose and single mind, suddenly took flight—many-winged but cohesive—and disappeared away to the east. I stared unbelievingly at the barren ground where they had been rooted. A fairly adjacent shell-burst restored me noisily to reality, and I hurried back into the turret.

That night we moved back to leaguer in a march that I thought was never going to end. With the blackness of night engulfing us and the sand and dust pouring into our confined hard world, we turned our backs on the bright lights of the German positions and clanked chain-like into the empty south. The wireless sets in each Honey were tuned in to stations all over Europe and the Middle East, anywhere there was music, to keep driver and commander awake. One tank deviating from the line of march would take half the battalion blundering off sleepily into the night. It

was an extra and alarming responsibility for tank commanders and drivers who had been without anything more than a few snatched hours of sleep each night for two weeks—and that, moreover, at the end of days full of nerve-racking fear and hideous activity or, at the least, hours and hours of eye-straining vigil.

Not until three hours and ten miles later were we arranged in our phalanxed, armoured dormitories, dropping down on hard-found bits of soft sand among the pebbles and rocks. At midnight a D.R. came round, breaking through the blankets of unconsciousness, to summon squadron commanders to a conference at the Colonel's tank.

"Christ Almighty," I muttered as I stumbled dazedly away from sleep "Why couldn't they just let me stay a lieutenant?"

The C.O. greeted us wearily, and as we clustered round the inevitable map, he told us that all the armour that was left in 30 Corps was to be concentrated under Gatehouse. This meant that the surviving Crusader tanks of 22nd Armoured Brigade were to be handed over. There were only 25 of them left, but with reinforcements that were arriving that night, the total strength of the 4th Armoured would be brought up to 120 tanks—more than we had had for many days, but still well short of the full complement.

On hearing this, most of us thought it could only be a prelude to some new violence and an ending of the period of inconclusiveness of the past few days. We were surprised and, I believe genuinely disappointed that instead of a decisive encounter battle with the panzer divisions which would end up in us either being buried in the sand or else taken on an heroic return to Cairo, we were to continue our rôle of protection and to harass and destroy the enemy as opportunity offered.

This sort of vague instruction usually results in nothing happening at all. The thirteenth day was no exception. It was an almost exact replica of the previous day, with all its alarms and especially its excursions. All day long, too, we heard the gunfire in the north and wondered what it was all about and who was winning. Nobody told us.

Back again in leaguer at night we were greatly pleased to hear that 5th Tanks had had a considerable set-to with Ariete Division away on our left flank, and that Paddy Doyle's squadron of Honeys had knocked out sixteen M13s. We all wanted to have a crack at

the Eyeties, and I could never understand why we were not launched in a full-scale attack on Ariete. There were plenty of opportunities after they had left the minefields of El Gubi.

FOURTEENTH DAY

THE second crisis had come swiftly at Sidi Rezegh. Failure to relieve the pressure on the New Zealand Division (it was our failure, but not our fault) had put them in an impossible position, and made our inactivity of the past two days plainly culpable.

Long before sunrise we were wakened by urgent orders to move at all speed to the airfield to assist the withdrawal of the New Zealanders, who were in grave danger of being overrun. It was a shock to us to discover that our complete ignorance of the course the battle was taking, except in our limited vicinity, was concealing a set-back of such magnitude.

Before the sun had risen the whole brigade was on the move to Sidi Rezegh, that fateful and fatal magnet whose significance still seemed to elude the comprehension of the higher command. Our 3rd Battalion travelled on the right flank, furthest away from the enemy. The brigade centre-line was directed straight at the airfield, and we sped north, each Honey a rosy blob in the sunrise, the dew-soaked sand yielding no dust. As the desert lit up it revealed familiar birs and cairns that we had been passing and repassing, repeating and repeating in our wireless chatter, every day since the campaign opened. The sombre relics of earlier battles surrounded us, as familiar and static as the cairns and contours.

Looking over towards the clouds of dust and unsightly smoke that seemed to hang permanently between the escarpment of Sidi Rezegh, I wondered if the air above that contested strip of earth would ever be clear again.

With the daylight and increasing visibility came the shells, scattering broadly among us as we rumbled forward. My troop was up in protection front—it had become an automatic rôle—and I could hear the quick whine and bang of missiles as they passed close overhead seeking the bigger concentrations behind.

Through the murk of morning enemy guns flashed along the distant crests. There was no need to report their position; half-a-dozen O.P.s would already have spotted them and be plotting their

position for counter-battery fire. Soon, and once again, my three Honeys were poised on the edge of the scarp. It was almost the identical spot where, just eight days of a lifetime before, I had gaped at the fantastic scene below while the long brigadier had hammered on the walls of my tank.

I half-expected to see him again, dashing up to me in his little car with the blond hair of his driver gleaming in the sunlight. For down in that embattled depression and stretching away to the north over the next drop was just such another scene of angry chaos.

The landing ground was still a mass of disintegrated vehicles, and the same planes stood around the edges, blackened and forlorn. But now vehicles were moving away in a steady stream over the flank of the depression where the land takes another step down to the sea. In the midst of it all the tomb of Saint Rezegh gleamed white and unforgettable.

What astonished me most was that the ridge opposite me, and all of the feature known as Point 175, seemed to be in the occupation of the enemy. I could see them quite clearly through my binoculars about three miles away—men and trucks and unmistakable Italian tanks. And they were in the rear of the New Zealanders. Once again, it was a tactical situation which was beyond my capacity to envisage, but which just had to be accepted since it was there—along with all the other unexpected and apparently impossible situations which had confronted us throughout the campaign and which were dealt with or avoided on the spur of the moment.

It was 7.30 in the morning when my troop arrived at the southernmost escarpment. The next few hours have been variously recorded in half a dozen regimental diaries and histories. My own recollections of the events of that morning do not seem to bear very much resemblance to any of the official versions. It is not easy for me to think that it all happened in my imagination; I was there at the time.

By 8 o'clock we had orders to push on to contact the New Zealanders and ensure their safe withdrawal from the enemy. Accordingly, we set off down the long slope coming under heavy fire from the right all the way. This petered out as we got beyond vision. By-passing the airfield on our left, my troop was very soon perched on the second escarpment directly above the Trigh Capuzzo. Shells of all calibres were churning up the earth in and

around a dispersed group of vehicles left behind to transport the New Zealand rearguard.

I asked the C.O. for further instructions, and was ordered to contact the New Zealand commander (if I could find him) and tell him that he was to withdraw immediately through our tanks. We pushed on down across the road and pulled up behind a cluster of derelict vehicles, including one Matilda I-tank. There I got down and walked forward to where I could have a good look at the ground ahead. I was unwilling to take my Honey out on to open ground most of which, if our information was true, was already in the hands of the enemy. I felt singularly exposed, but the thought of being hit by a stray piece of shrapnel worried me less than being obliterated by a direct hit from an 88. Harry Maegraith joined me, and we peered through our binoculars from behind the thick comfort of the Matilda. About 100 yards in front I saw within the converging O of my glasses an officer sitting with his back to me on the edge of a slit trench, his feet dangling inside.

"Christmas night, Harry; isn't that Freyberg sitting there?"

"It certainly looks like the pictures of him. What the hell's he doing there?"

"Well, whoever it is," I said, "he's the chap to give the message to."

"Shall I go, Bob?"

"No. You wait here. If it is Freyberg, it's a man I've always wanted to meet."

"If you can find anybody to introduce you . . ." Harry was saying when we were astonished to see a solitary German lorry coming along the Trigh from the west. It drove right past the remnants of the New Zealanders, right past my troop, and headed straight for battalion headquarters behind me. Alongside the lorry galloped a little black and white dog, like a fox terrier. We watched it, grinning, imagining the consternation on the driver's face when he found himself in the middle of a lot of British tanks.

Just to make sure I sent Harry running back to his Honey to tell the C.O. what was coming towards him. You never know with these things; it may have had Rommel in the front. Just then the driver realized his mistake, whirled the vehicle round in the great cloud of spurting sand, and tore back along the road. Behind it the fox terrier was stretched out like a greyhound, yapping, but the lorry and the dog got clean away. We didn't mind particularly.

After this diversion I left the shelter of the I-tank and walked forward, a little tremulously but sustained by that nonchalant figure by the slit trench. I covered the 100 yards as casually as I could, struggling not to throw myself flat on my face every time I heard the whine and crunch of a shell. I halted behind a broad back and said "Sir!" loudly above the enveloping noise.

The officer's rank was concealed from me under some sort of jerkin but there was no mistaking that face. I saluted smartly as he looked round.

"Third Tank Battalion. Fourth Armoured Brigade, sir. I have a message for the commanding officer, New Zealand Division."

"Then you'd better give it to me, my boy. And get into this slit trench while you're at it."

"I can give it to you standing, thank you sir. It's not a long message . . . thank God."

He grinned up at me and I told him that he was to pull out eastwards right away, that our Honeys were in position to cover his withdrawal. I pointed them out to him, where they stood patient in that derelict litter.

"Right. I hope the car is a runner." He indicated a big Humber staff car nearby. I heard a new sound now, the quick zip and chatter of machine-gun bullets. I saluted again and beat it.

Back behind the jilted fortress of the Matilda, Maegraith and I watched Freyberg as he summoned the last of his officers and men. Twelve or fifteen soldiers got up out of the scrub and sand, and clambered into and all over the staff car. There was the usual moment of doubt and then, with men festooned all over the bonnet, mudguards and boot, it wheeled about, sped past us and vanished down the Trigh Capuzzo. I felt a nudge from Harry.

Coming down the slope into the area that had just been occupied by the New Zealanders was a long column of dark-coated men, four abreast, that seemed to stretch back indefinitely. We could not see the end of it over the next escarpment. They threaded their way slowly, disinterestedly, through the abandoned transport, slit trenches and shell-holes. They were not more than 500 yards away from us, and I looked at them, almost unbelieving, through my glasses. I have never seen such a jaded, dispirited lot of men.

Many of them were capless, and the slanting rays of the early sun revealed starkly the dirt and dishevelment, the weariness of the spirit reflected in those weary faces. They shuffled glumly down the slope, eyes on the ground immediately about them, not once

looking up towards our tanks or the departing New Zealand troops. They came to a shambling sort of halt, looking about for a place where they could conveniently go to ground.

Maegraith and I raced for our tanks. I got on the air to the C.O. and told him of the wonderful target that was waiting just ahead adding that we were about to engage with machine-gun fire. His reply was a trifle disturbing:

"Never mind about that just now. We've been surrounded. We're to fight our way out and try to rally three miles south of the airfield. Move at once."

I scanned the empty crests and depressions to the south, and the gloomy column of enemy still standing in doleful ranks. I looked across at Harry. He lifted his hands shoulder high in the turret in an expressive, despairing gesture and we followed on behind the wheeling Honeys of the rest of the battalion. I kept my binoculars on the German infantry. As far as I could see they displayed no interest whatever in our presence or our movement. One thing was clear—if the enemy had just won another Sidi Rezegh battle, those blokes didn't know it.

Every minute as we sped back towards the rallying point I expected to hear the earphones burst into life with the first frantic reports of enemy tanks. Nothing happened, and we climbed out on to that familiar plateau above the landing ground like friendly dogs returning to the well-savoured odours of an accustomed lamp-post after an inter-suburban frolic.

Long after, this incident was graphically recalled, and confirmed, for me by the account of the official New Zealand war historian who was wounded and captured in that vicinity at the time. He was in a forward dressing station which had been overrun by the German attack on the previous evening, and was a witness of much of the morning's activity. This is what he wrote: "My firm impression, and also General Kippenberger's, was that the German troops who passed through or near the M.D.S. at that time were practically sleepwalkers and certainly did not regard themselves as victorious. I think their morale was very near breaking point. . . ."

Back at the rallying point, reached without sight let alone sound of the enemy, we were remote enough from danger to meet our replenishment vehicles and top up with petrol. We hadn't used any ammo.

For the rest of the afternoon we watched aeroplanes. It was exciting to see the nervous coveys of Stukas making their quick,

frightening raids and breaking up in terror as the Spitfires and Hurricanes pounced. After our experience in Greece, dominated by the German dive-dombers, there was no more pleasant or rewarding sight than to watch the Stukas wheeling and twisting and side-slipping clumsily in front of the fighters. The swoop of the Spitfire would be followed by a black surge of smoke from the Stuka, and then the wild, vertical plunge and crash into eternity.

In the evening, when the sky grew red and the desert grew dark, fighter patrols and the swift couples of photo-reconnaissance planes flew casually back across the battlefield. We watched them enviously. In an hour's time, bathed, shaved and feeling the cleanliness of clean clothes, their pilots would be yelling for taxis heading for the Dug-out under the Hotel Metropole or the roof-garden on top of the Continental, listening to that ripe plum of a female singing "Sand in my Shoes". There would be iced lager at Tommy's bar, martinis on the verandah at Shepheard's, while the girl friends were rounded up for the dinner-dance at Gezira. Soft lights, soft music, bright tablecloths, a flask of wine and thou.... What was that lovely American girl doing now? . . .

So the planes winged back through an afternoon sky, over a land where it was already night; the long escarpment of Sidi Rezegh stretched across the horizon full of Germans and Italians.

'God in heaven,' I thought, 'it was like this before we started. Is nobody ever going to win this bloody war?'

In the darkness we moved back to deep-rutted Bir Berraneb.

FIFTEENTH AND SIXTEENTH DAYS

THE next few days stay with me as a confusion of movement in which we moved everywhere and never got anywhere. It was a period in which we seemed to be disembodied from the main battle—the struggle for decision going on always beyond the next crest. Hour became indistinguishable from hour, surrounded by a monotony of sameness in the confined desert round which we moved like bulky and uneconomical errand boys. Somehow the high tempo of the battle had vanished, and with it the crusading spirit that had inspired us in that bright beginning. We were all, I think, past the climax of endeavour, approaching a point of mental and physical exhaustion. Subconsciously we realized that the crisis of this battle was over and that the victory, though

invisible, was present there in the dust and days and death ahead. For us it coincided with a moment, undefinable in time, when there is a realization that the future is real again and important and that you yourself want to be in it. It is not a good way for the fighting man to feel. It happens to them all—some a good deal sooner than others. The New Zealand General Kippenberger relates a curious story to show that such feelings are pretty universal. . . .

At the end of that first day of December, as the victorious enemy forces re-occupied the vital spaces around Sid Rezegh, a German artillery officer limped up to him in the captured dressing station in which he had been made prisoner, and said: "We have retaken Belhamed and our eastern and western forces have joined hands. But it is no use. We have lost the battle. Our losses are too heavy. We have lost the battle."

That German officer was past the zenith. He had reached the point where the future was more important than the present.

The trial of strength had taken place. The issue had been decided, no matter how many battles were still to be fought and how many graves were still to be scratched in the sand. There was nothing conclusive in the dispositions of either side. There was still an apparent stalemate and on the face of it the Axis armies had won an important victory. But on our side we all felt that although we had practically no idea of what was going on, we were not going to end up on the losing side. We couldn't put it any stronger than that.

For two days we lay at Bir Berraneb. There was plenty to do . . . maintenance of tanks and guns, laundering of clothes and hair, laborious shaving, reorganizing of the battalion with the arrival of reinforcements and the loan of a squadron from 8th Hussars. The tank strength of 3R.T.R. was now about 40, and a good deal of rearranging was made even more necessary by the posting to 'B' echelon of the 'A' squadron commander. I was sorry for the major, a regular officer, whose foolishness would set him back many years on the over-crowded ladder of seniority.

I became second-in-command of 'C' squadron once more under "Withers", an efficient regular sergeant-major before the war, who had gone through O.C.T.U. in the Westminster Dragoons at the same time as I had. I wasn't in the least big upset. I knew it had to happen as soon as we were brought up to strength. All I wanted was the war to finish quickly as possible so that I could get to hell

out of it. And I was still left more or less to my own resources with my troop; neither did I have to deal with all the administrative bumph.

During this rest period we were told the army commander's plans for the immediate future. This was to clean up the area north of El Gubi with the Indian Brigade, assisted by I-tanks. This would isolate that strongly defended position due south of El Adem and Tobruk, and by further penetration westwards it was hoped to make both Gubi and Tobruk untenable. The ultimate object stayed the same—destruction of the German-Italian forces to prevent their regrouping back in Tripolitania to start the whole deadly, weary business all over again. Possession of the ground without the destruction of the enemy was, in the desert, quite purposeless—as a whole stream of commanders on both sides discovered between 1939 and 1943.

The rôle of destruction in this case had been allotted to 4th Armoured Brigade. I had the impression that we were going about it in a rather curious way, but I am sure this had very little to do with Gatehouse's wishes and I was beginning to appreciate that the simple issues of a local situation in war become vastly more complicated in the aggregate back at Army headquarters. I could never get rid of the thought, though, that if all the simple issues were resolved simply then the final pattern would lose a great deal of its complexity.

Our immediate purpose in this phase of the Crusader campaign was to prevent armoured interference with the infantry attack on El Gubi, and prevent any enemy forces withdrawing northwards as a result of the attack. In the early morning, therefore, the whole brigade positioned itself in the area between El Gubi and El Adem, where we sat more or less motionless all the morning and the greater part of the afternoon. "C" squadron was on the extreme northern flank of this immobile manoeuvre. Becoming bored and eye-sore with too much watching, I went off alone on a little jaunt to the first of the big escarpments to the north.

There was usually some activity going on up there, and you could see something coming long before they could see you. Sure enough, when I reached that long ridge that seemed to stretch the whole length of the North African littoral I became immediately aware of the vast movement of vehicles and tanks *eastward* through the Sidi Rezegh depression and away along the familiar highway of the Trigh Capuzzo. Such a large-scale move-

ment in that direction did not fit in anywhere with the tactical situation that had been described to us the previous evening.

I went as close as I dared to establish positively that it was a German column, and then got on the air to the C.O., in a state of considerable excitement. I thought it was the beginning of another Rommel dash to The Wire and our rear areas. The Colonel told me to keep out of the way and watch developments, and he would contact me again after he had been in touch with Brigade. So I sat and watched the long-dust-covered convoy, the grim panzers sliding along the flanks like destroyers round a fleet of merchant ships. The C.O. came back on the blower to tell me that Army knew all about the move, that Rommel was apparently trying to relieve his forces bottled-up in Bardia and Sollum, and that it was being taken care of. In the meantime I was to keep an eye on them, but not to get committed.

"None of your bloody nonsense, Bob," he said. "We'll need every tank we've got for the next operation."

I was a bit exposed perched on that rim of rock, so I sneaked along to a place where the ground was broken by low sand ridges which enabled me to get up to within 500 yards of the column of M.E.T. as they moved slowly on. I kept on thinking of Bardia, where they were heading; Bardia with its lighthouse that I had looked down upon that second afternoon. Now, more than two weeks later, the enemy was still in Bardia and here was the whole Afrika Korps, 500 yards away, heading towards it along the Trigh Capuzzo.

How many times had I crossed the Trigh since the first elated day? But it was still an Axis highway, and Bardia was still an Axis fort.

Crouched behind a convenient hummock I reckoned we were secure enough in that light to have a brew. There had been no other opportunity that day, and we could never make one in leaguer with its strict orders against lights. I sent the gunner and operator out to make the tea while I kept wireless watch. The driver stayed at his controls, with engine ticking over, just in case.

The packed rows of lorries passing along before me were an inviting machine-gun target, and I could picture the flap that would result from a couple of quick bursts. I did not want to do anything that would interrupt our tea-party, but could not help thinking that if Army were really taking care of this enemy

move they would be plastering it with everything they had got.

The glow of sunset was turning to the purple prelude of night before the end of that column passed across my front. I was sitting on top of the turret sipping tea when suddenly two squat, sinister shapes detached themselves from the rearmost group of panzers and came swiftly out straight for me. I yelled at the gunner and operator, lolling in the sand over their steaming mugs, and they clambered past me down into the turret, not however letting go of their tea. I told Whaley to start reversing slowly so that we would not attract too much attention but could get away from the dwindling smoke from our fire. I think it was that which had attracted the panzers, and not the Honey. I doubted whether they could even see it. We had gone about 30 yards backwards when the engine spluttered to a stop to be followed by a now familiar noise—the ineffectual whirring of the self-starter.

"O.K., Whaley, don't tell me. We're out of petrol," I said into the mike. "Better load both guns. But I don't think we're going to need them."

The two panzers had come to a halt about 400 yards away. I could only just see them in the gloom, and I was pretty sure they could barely see me. Certainly they could not know that I was out there all on my own. After a few minutes of steadily watching each other I think both sides accepted that nothing aggressive was contemplated, and my mind turned to the next problem—how to get out of there.

I switched the set to 'send': "Hullo, MABO, MABO One calling. I have run out of petrol at map reference figures. . . ." "Withers" came back to tell me he would come himself to give me a tow in, and that I was to watch out for him and guide him in. I did not mention the two panzers, and I hoped that the arrival of the other Honey would not upset the careful relationship that had been established between us. We finished our tea a little uneasily.

I got the operator out on the turret to help me spot "Withers" when he came within the very limited range of vision. I knew that within another 10 minutes or so the chances were that he would miss us altogether. The operator gave a sudden shout and pointed to the moving smudge in the scrub about 600 yards away. It was heading diagonally away from us towards the north-west, and I got on the air quickly, talking him in like an aeroplane

landing in fog. I also told him to move very slowly as I was under observation by the enemy. I did not want to put it stronger than that.

"Withers" came in gently, and was flabbergasted when I showed him the two dim panzers and the bulky tail of the long column that was disappearing in the dark. We hooked up in something like record time and set off on the long grind back to the battalion. It was not until we were safely in leaguer that we realized that our most priceless possession had been left behind—the kettle and our little store of tea.

SEVENTEENTH DAY

THE spring had now reached its full compression, and was ready to recoil violently at the release of pressure. The fluid battle had come to an end. There was to be no more scurrying to and fro across the vasty surface of the desert, crossing and recrossing our tracks half a dozen times a day, fifty times a week. The pattern was changed to the assault on static defences left as rearguards, followed by the envelopment or breakthrough and then the brief pursuit to the next defensive position.

This did not become immediately or easily apparent. There was the knowledge, always with us, that to be obliterated by a retreating 88 was no different to being obliterated by an advancing 88. The people most concerned are pretty unaware of the subtle difference between death in victory and death in defeat. If anything, the latter comes more easily. Nevertheless, it is an exhilarating feeling, and has considerable psychological advantages, to realize that you are on the winning side.

On this seventeenth day the present was still very much with us as we moved off before dawn to be on our battle position by 7 o'clock. Any thoughts we harboured of an early end to the struggle and a triumphant march to Benghazi were rudely and demonstrably shattered when the leading squadron ran slap into an anti-tank screen, and had four Honeys knocked out in exchange for one M13 and some damage to the transport which had lured them on to the guns.

I was away on the right flank, and was gratified to know of this only second-hand over the air. We sat around for several hours while our 25-pounders thundered on to the menace concealed in

the sand and scrub, and the probing went on in search of a soft spot. The enemy was reacting strongly to the new developments, and his artillery all along the line running northwards from El Gubi was pounding our tank concentrations with a greater intensity than anything we had previously experienced. I took it as a good sign that Rommel should now hurl shells at us instead of panzers. But then, I wasn't at that moment being shelled.

At 3 o'clock in the afternoon the information came that there was a mass movement westwards of enemy M.E.T. and tanks from the Bardia area. Apparently Rommel had given up the attempt to rescue his garrisons. The big pull-out had begun.

To try and intercept this move, the armoured brigade was ordered north, and the new order of march placed 3R.T.R. on the left flank, running right across the enemy's front. It was a very noisy and unhealthy locality, and our progress was continually held up by heavy bombardments and by the need for keeping an eye on the Italian tanks that were poised in a good position to swoop out on our flank—if they had wanted to.

Normally, we did not pay overmuch attention to shell-fire except when the heaviest calibre guns were in action. Apart from broken tracks and suspension, there was little damage that could be done to a tank unless a shell happened to drop slap down the turret. This did happen occasionally, with indescribable results, but it was a remote contingency which we discarded because it was so unpleasant to think about. On this afternoon, however, so many shells plastered the earth all round us that we were compelled to shift position constantly.

The leading formations of the brigade reached their designated position, and were pushed up north against the Trigh. "C" squadron was sent probing out to the left to try and do something about the enemy guns and to maintain closer observation.

In a state of some trepidation my troop went forward gingerly. About 1,000 yards away was a little white-washed house surrounded by a low parapet. At first I thought this was some curious mirage which would dissolve into camels in due course, but it was substantial enough and I came to the conclusion that it must be the village of El Gubi itself. Anyway, I decided that whatever O.P.s were directing the fire of the enemy guns, some of them would be in there. In between shell bursts I was studying this building and wall carefully through my binoculars when I suddenly felt the tank buck and heard the sharp crack, either of a

gun or of the impact (I could never be sure which). At the same time I got a fleeting glimpse of a puff of white smoke lifting out of the scrub from in front of the white walls. It was too fleeting for certainty, but was real enough to alarm me. I glanced swiftly down into the turret, where two anxious but otherwise undismayed faces stared back at me. Nothing seemed to be amiss in there.

Quickly I got the machine-gun trained on what I thought was the appropriate spot, explaining to the gunner that I wanted him to fire a long burst so that I could see the strike of the bullets in the sand and correct him on to the target area. At the same time I told my troop tank commanders what was going on, and that they were to engage the same area with machine-guns.

The Browning was just reaching where I wanted it when there was another sharp shudder-bang. This time I had seen the gun-flash clearly. I thought my gunner would have seen it too since his telescopic sight must have been trained right on it. "Get that bloody anti-tank gun quick," I told him. "He'll have us in a second or two if you don't."

There was no responsive burst from the Browning, and I felt the tug on my trousers. The gunner was lying crouched in the bottom of the turret with the operator working over him with dressing and bandages. He shouted up at me: "He's got it in the leg, sir."

I told the driver to reverse out as quick as he could. Then my troop sergeant came on to tell me he had seen the flash, and that he was engaging the anti-tank gun. I told him we had been hit and that he was to pull back until he could find a hull-down position, then continue firing. Next I contacted "Withers" and asked him to arrange for medical attention at B.H.Q., where I was going to take my gunner.

I was pleased to see the other troop tanks reversing slowly as I had taught them, with both their guns blazing away. When I thought it was safe to turn about we speeded up and wheeled away back to H.Q.

It's a hell of a job getting a badly wounded man out of a tank. We extricated him as gently as we could, not without causing him a good deal of agony, through the driving compartment out of the front of the Honey and on to a stretcher which MacMillan and his orderlies had made ready.

The poor gunner had a hell of a hole in his thigh. When he

had been laid on the ground in the shadow of a truck and Doc had got to work on him with the morphia and dressings I went back to inspect the damage to the Honey. The first shell—it looked like a 30-mm.—was still embedded in the front plate. A foot or so away from it there was a round pock-mark in the armour-plating ending in a small, clean hole not half-an-inch in diameter right in the middle of the driver's visor. Whaley was the first to spot what had happened. The AP shell had struck fair and square on the head of a rivet. The rivet, plus a stream of hot lead, had hurtled straight past the driver into the turret and embedded itself in the gunner's leg.

I made Whaley climb back into his seat. Then I closed the visor and peered back through the little hole. That stream of molten lead and rivet could not have missed his left ear by more than one inch.

"You ought to become a missionary, Whaley, when this is over." He stared fascinated at the little circle of light just in front of his face.

We went together over to the gunner, now full of morphia and with a cigarette between compressed lips. The doctor had his orderly make us a cup of tea each, and we sat alongside the stretcher chatting of everything except that leg. He was a good chap, that gunner, and a good gunner. I was sad at losing him.

He said to me with a tight smile: "Did I do all right, Bob?"

It's funny how many of them will ask you that—the good ones who have done all right but want to be quite sure about it, as something very important to themselves and their whole future.

"You did fine, Bill. Just hurry up and get better and come back. There's always a place for you in my tank."

"Thanks Bob. You don't mind if I call you Bob now, do you sir?"

"You can call me anything you like, Bill."

Then they took him away to the ambulance. I asked the Doctor:

"How bad is it?"

"The bone's badly smashed. I dunno...."

When I told him what had hit that leg he raised his eyebrows and shook his head.

"He won't lose his leg altogether, will he, Doc?"

"Can't tell. He may be all right."

The gunner never came back to our Honey. They had to cut his leg off.

EIGHTEENTH TO TWENTIETH DAY

To our great astonishment we headed our tanks towards the sunrise as soon as we woke, and rumbled straight back to our old stamping ground at Bir Berraneb. It only increased our bewilderment when the gen came round that the previous day's operations had been successful, and we were to stand-by to move to an area south-west of El Adem. There was one proviso—we would only move if all went well with the programme laid on around Gubi for the Indian Brigade and the Guards Brigade which had recently been sent forward.

Alas, all did not go well. Rommel made a vigorous counter-attack with the remnants of his two panzer divisions on the Indian infantry, who had to fall back hurriedly into the Guards' position further south. Incredibly enough, the German commander was still hanging on grimly to the idea of a decisive blow in the desert so that he could relieve his forces in Sollum and Bardia. He had, in fact, intended the attack on El Gubi to be a desperate and decisive encounter with the British armour. He could hardly imagine that at such a moment, during the pregnant afternoon of December 5, the British armour was some miles back at Berraneb practising a new method of night leaguring.

Thus Rommel's destructive blow fell on one infantry brigade, who side-stepped hurriedly and left the punch to peter out in the empty sands around the Well of Gubi. That night the Axis high command held a conference to hear an emissary of El Duce tell them that the situation in the Mediterranean was such that further shipments of anything but small quantities of men and equipment were out of the question. Rommel then revealed to General Bastico, his Italian opposite number, that the two divisions of the German Panzer Korps had started the battle with more than 250 tanks and that they were now reduced to fewer than 40.

Poor General Bastico, who had been carefully kept out of the picture all along, was dumbfounded. He quickly agreed to the withdrawal to Tripoli, and that the Agedabia line should be fortified and manned as swiftly as possible.

It was indeed a significant time in the battle, this eighteenth day, but in 4th Armoured Brigade it passed us by completely. Back at Berraneb we had no inkling of the swift climax that was

approaching. Indeed, we thought the army commander's intentions were slightly optimistic. In the evening there were none of the customary orders for the following day, except that we heard an attack was to be made on El Adam.

The new style of leaguering was a great success that night, and I went along as usual to MacMillan's ambulance to have my foot seen to. Every night, when I took off my desert boot, the sock would come away in a soggy mess.

"I wish we could stop this bleeding, Bob," the Doc said. "If it doesn't stop pretty soon you'll have to go back to rear echelon to get it fixed up."

"Not bloody likely. Send me back to Alex or Cairo and I'm all for it. But I'm not going to loaf around some divisional or Corps area saluting staff officers every five seconds just to get my big toe bandaged."

He put a new dressing on and I went back to my tank to listen to the 9 o'clock B.B.C. news—10 o'clock Western Desert time.

We were hustled out of our blankets before six on the morning of December 6. It was the nineteenth day, and we had to be ready to move in half an hour—no brews. In 20 minutes we were in our Honeys with engines revving warm. The orders came through the earphones: "4th Armoured Brigade will move on a bearing of 280 degrees for $18\frac{1}{2}$ miles, 3R.T.R. leading, three up."

As we lined up on the new bearing and rumbled off to the west, I measured out the distance roughly on my map. $18\frac{1}{2}$ miles was going to take us well to the other side of the enemy lines. The Indians must have done all right. Nobody told us they had been driven out of their positions the previous evening. However, somebody remembered in time, and it was not yet 7 o'clock when we were told that the leg had been reduced to $10\frac{1}{2}$ miles.

By 8 o'clock "A" and "B" Squadrons were in contact with about 30 enemy tanks, who had withdrawn rapidly.

"Eyeties," I thought, away on the left flank. "Why do I never get a crack at those M13s?"

With the news of the contact made further north still ringing in the earphones, we pressed on cautiously, searching the ground ahead for the first tell-tale flash and puff from a hidden gun. Coming over a low ridge I was a little surprised to see a Volkswagen staff car not more than 100 yards in front of me with four Jerries attached to it . . . one at the wheel and the other four push-

ing like mad. My surprise was nothing to the one they got. Goodness knows what they were doing out there. They threw up their hands as soon as my Honey appeared over the ridge. We moved up alongside where their car was stuck in soft sand. I pointed to the tow rope on the side of the tank and they quickly interpreted my gesticulation. When we were hitched up the tank pulled them clear quickly and I sent them all off—there was one officer among them—to battalion headquarters, escorted by my troop corporal.

A cluster of armoured cars moved across us, and I hurried to cut them off. It was a troop of 6th South African A.C., and they were on their way to join the rest of their unit well to the west. They told me that the previous night a German column had passed right through their lines, and that they had knocked out two tanks.

We parted with a few nostalgic Afrikaans farewells. I waited till they had got well ahead before moving on. It is a comfortable feeling to know that nothing is suddenly going to go bang at you.

In the evening, without any further incident during the course of the day and while I was wondering what had happened to the opposition, 3R.T.R. wheeled off northwards to protect a "Jock" column (a highly mobile composite packet of infantry, field-guns and anti-tank weapons) which was anticipating an attack by enemy tanks. Once again this turned out to be a sort of crescendo effect of an accumulation of imaginations rather than fact, but it kept us out till dark, and the whole battalion got hopelessly lost on the way back. About 10 o'clock we finally leaguered where the moment found us, with an assurance from brigade that our replenishment vehicles would be sent up at first light, when they would be able to see us. The C.O. sent for me, and told me to take a troop out at dawn to make sure that we were not interfered with from the north.

Just before sunrise the next morning I was off with my other two Honeys, and within half an hour was back on the rim of the Sidi Rezegh escarpment in what had become very nearly a reserved parking place. We were directly above the landing ground, deserted now of anything live or intact, and I was listening to the inter-battalion chatter on the wireless and wondering if we could risk a brew when I suddenly spotted a small moving object coming towards the northern edge of the aerodrome. My troop sergeant was in his turret about 30 yards away, and I beckoned him over. Together we examined this solitary vehicle. It was a small armoured car of some sort and I realized that if it continued its

course it would reach the escarpment just below me. It was impossible to identify it any better than that, and I got in touch with the C.O. to ask if he could establish the position in front of me so that I could make up my mind whether this vehicle was enemy or friendly. After a minute or two he told me to assume that anything on the airfield or north of it was enemy. By this time the armoured car was half-way across the landing ground and the first rays of the sun were striking full on it. I sent the sergeant back to his tank with instructions to get his guns on to it, but not on any account to fire unless he heard me fire. Then I told my gunner to get his crosswires on target for the 37-mm.

We sat there silently, the muzzle of the cannon moving slowly downwards in conformity with the steady progress of the vehicle. Two gunners were sitting there with their fingers curved round the triggers. A gentle squeeze, and two lumps of armour-piercing lead would go hurtling through the air. That would be the end of the armoured car and its occupants. But I was filled with an awful doubt. The vehicle was beginning to look very much like one of our own scout cars. The enemy had nothing like them, but was in the habit of using all the vehicles he captured, so that was no guide. I looked in vain for the swastika and palm tree of the Afrika Korps, and then, through the binoculars, I could clearly see the two figures sitting in it. The man next to the driver wore a peaked cap, a sheepskin jerkin and a coloured scarf. It was the unmistakeable uniform of the Desert Army officer. I told my gunner quickly to unload, and got on the air to my troop sergeant and the other Honey to do the same.

By the time the scout car reached the foot of the escarpment I was standing on the edge of the cliff waving my arms to it. It came up a break in the steep slope, and soon I was shaking hands with a handsome, grey-haired officer.

"My name's Norrie," he said, and I came stiffly to attention and saluted. He was General Willoughby Norrie, commander of 30 Corps.

"Holy Smoke!" I gulped at him after I had introduced myself, "do you realize that for the last 600 yards you've been a split second away from eternity? I was told to assume that anything on the airfield was enemy."

"But the corridor's open to Tobruk. Has been since yesterday evening. I've just come from our chaps over at Ed Duda. You'd better let your people know, though it's not really important. I

don't think you're going to spend any more time around this area. Well, I must be getting along. Goodbye."

He shook my hand again, climbed into his scout car and drove off to the south-east. I was considerably shaken at the thought of how near we had come to bumping off one of the most senior and ablest commanders in the British army. It would not, of course, have been my fault. It was very typical of the incredibly confused state of the Crusader battle and the complete lack of reliable information at the disposal of the fighting units.

The operator summoned me back to my Honey; the C.O. was on the air with an urgent message to rejoin the battalion immediately. As we travelled south again at full speed I heard the orders going over the air. They bore out what I had just been thinking about our information; certainly some very curious reports must have been getting back to the rear headquarters, where our future moves were planned. Once again we were given a westerly bearing to march on for 10 miles, but we hadn't gone more than three when the leading squadrons ran slap into a large-scale battle. It was the sort of battle we liked least—trying to get at enemy tanks lying behind a screen of concealed anti-tank guns supported by shell-fire. Four Honeys were knocked out in as many minutes before adequate cover and protective fire could be found.

Very fortunately I was right at the tail-end of the move, having been delayed by late arrival and the need to fill up at the night's leaguer. I was soon up in the line where the battalion Honeys lay pinned down. More and more German and Italian tanks could be seen quite clearly, gathering in the distance, but every time a forward move was made the air was filled with lead and noise.

As long as we lay doggo, they did the same. We fired occasionally at long range, just to keep them nervous, and the R.H.A. plastered the whole area continuously with gunfire. I was wriggling my way forward through the convolutions of the ground, thinking of the times on the beach at Durban when I would try and get further out from the shore than anybody else, when I spotted the lorries arriving alongside the panzers and the routine movements of filling-up beginning. From the south-east a long column of transport was moving away to the north.

When I sent back this information, the brigadier laid on an attack with 22nd Armoured Brigade, but after we had watched a couple of Crusaders and a Honey go up in smoke it was called off.

I couldn't help wondering whether I ought to have kept my bloody mouth shut.

By the early afternoon we had not been able to make any progress, and after the engines had been running continuously for over six hours, it was decided we needed to refill with petrol. An attempt was made to send the lorries forward to the tanks, but this brought down such a hail of H.E. and machine-gun fire that they had to run for it, and were lucky to get away all in one piece. Troop by troop we went back to replenish, returning to our forward positions as we filled up. I don't suppose any of us particularly hurried over this process. It is unbelievably relaxing to get away from the fear of sudden death, even for 10 minutes.

Reports were coming in from everywhere of continuous movement of enemy transport to the north-west, but the panzers stayed in front of us, watchful and menacing. The C.O. came on the air to say that the brigadier thought it would be a good idea for 3R.T.R. to make a demonstration against the enemy to see what effect it would have. Nobody in 3R.T.R. thought it was a good idea.

As far as I was concerned there were two tactical phrases that I had come to mistrust intensely—one was "make a demonstration" and the other was "do a reconnaissance-in-force". The ultimate intention behind both these manœuvres was to persuade the enemy to withdraw without the pressure of encounter. It usually meant that the commander wanted a success without risking casualties. This otherwise wholly laudable object very often left the junior commander right in the middle, unsupported by the discipline of direct orders and encouraged by the lack of them at the same time. It freed the senior commander of a good deal of responsibility if things went hopelessly wrong; if nothing happened the lesser man was blamed for being insufficiently aggressive, while if too much happened the luckless junior would be blamed for being over-aggressive—after a brief period of mourning.

A demonstration implied movement of some sort which the squadrons translated into a change of position, not necessarily getting any nearer to the enemy. Any interpretation of the demonstration as a move against the German armour produced an immediate and very unpleasant reaction. It was pretty tough going all along the line.

"C" Squadron was well out on the left flank, and Maegraith reported a couple of stray Mark IIIs which had come well forward

from the main body of panzers and looked very much as though they were trying to get round our flank. I could think of no other reason for such a reckless move. Harry and I, with his troop sergeant, wriggled our Honeys through the sand-dunes to cut them off. We got to within about 700 yards when we saw the reason for their excursion. The two panzers had come to a halt behind some low mounds of earth which looked as though they had been recently thrown up from slit trenches. Nine or ten men jumped up and ran for the tanks.

We wasted no more time. The panzers were broadside-on, and as the first men reached them our three cannons went into action almost simultaneously. The red tracers streamed in flat lines just above the scrub, and in a few seconds there was that most satisfying of sights—a turret flapping open and figures leaping out and down. The unfortunate infantrymen stopped in their tracks and fell flat as soon as the firing started. The second Mark III spun its turret towards us, and there was one ominous orange-tipped puff of smoke from its gun muzzle before the 37-mm. shells from all three Honeys pounded into it. The enemy gun did not fire again, but nobody baled out, and we continued to pump lead until we saw the black smoke rising. In a few seconds it was a blazing inferno.

Our very natural self-satisfaction was short-lived. What seemed like every gun in the Afrika Korps and most of the Italian seemed to open up on us. We beat it out of there as fast as we could, heads well down. A couple of minutes later, behind the welcome shelter of a sandy ridge away from the tumult, I halted my driver and looked out to survey the damage. Maegraith pulled up alongside and shouted something. I took the earphones off to hear him.

"My sergeant's had it," he said, and for the first time I noticed that one Honey was missing. Carefully we moved to the top of the ridge, and from a turret-down position we looked back across the desert. Some 500 yards away the Honey lay desolate in the spurting explosions that still straddled it. Through binoculars we could see the dangling track and the shattered suspension. There was no sign of the crew, and we scanned the ground anxiously but without reward.

I got on to "Withers" to report the two tanks destroyed, as well as our own loss, and told him we would hang around a while in case any of the Honey crew had survived. We had not escaped undamaged. Water was pouring out of the cans on the back, the

bedding rolls were torn to shreds and a complete pair of bogie wheels had disappeared from my tank.

Harry was shouting something, and I looked round to see him standing on the crest of the ridge waving his beret. I ran over to him and saw the figures of the missing crew running flat out through the scrub. Soon they saw us, and changed direction. Miraculously there were four of them—and unharmed. In a few minutes they were with us; breathless, slightly dazed, but overjoyed that they were still alive and in one piece. We piled them on our two tanks and took them in to battalion H.Q. where we spent the last hour of the day as the fighting died down with the dying sun.

At 6 o'clock the firing stopped, and in the growing darkness the squadrons were recalled to the rallying point. Thence we moved back 3 miles to the south-east and safe harbourage. Mine was one of 4 Honeys that had to be evacuated that night for repairs. I had another one before morning. The last news that came around before we dropped into sleep was that we were to move at dawn to Bir Belchonfus, some 10 miles south of El Gubi. We seemed to have heard all that before.

TWENTY-FIRST AND TWENTY-SECOND DAYS

Most surprisingly, after the previous day's difficulties, the brigade reached Bir Belchonfus without serious incident. 5R.T.R. went on ahead to clean up a small pocket of M13s, and the composite Crusader squadron of 22nd Armoured Brigade was sent off on some special mission. Taking advantage of the brief lull, our C.O. made a strong appeal to Gatehouse for half an hour's break so that the tank crews could have some breakfast. We had not had a meal or a brew for over 36 hours. The request was granted, and soon the emptiness of Belchonfus was a bustle of khaki figures and thin spirals of smoky fires.

By 9 o'clock we were on the move again, heading north-west well into enemy territory—or what had just been enemy territory. 3R.T.R. was now covering the west and north-west, and for some miles we passed through an area where the Guards and the Indian brigades had fought their battle. The ground was littered with the abandoned paraphernalia of war, including one lonely and mournful Matilda. Out of curiosity I had a quick climb round it, and among other personal effects found some scribbled sheets of paper.

Without time to read them on the spot I thrust them into the breast pocket of my battledress and hurried on to join the rest of the squadron.

In the afternoon the leading tanks ran on to another anti-tank screen which, this time, the brigadier was content to engage with the 25-pounders. "C" Squadron was not concerned in the afternoon's performance, and I took the opportunity to glance again at the papers I had found. It was several sheets of poetry, and had obviously been recently composed in the desert. This was one of them :

THE SHELL

*The silver scream comes nearer
—faster than wind, faster than sound—
it is the song of a new-born thing,
singing her joy that she lives at last.*

*Her life is short, too short,
but joyous more than many million things
She droops to die, so soon,
for now she cries no more from joy,
but in her agony of death
her scream has changed to one of fear.*

*She falls to earth.
And there is a breathless hush upon the land
for death is near.*

*For in this particle of tiny time
her fear is caught by those nearby,
and stomachs turn and fingers twitch
and then within her agony of death
she leaves the world.*

*She leaves it with a cry, a shout, a trumpet-call
that brings a terror to your heart,
and death flies all around.*

*Her grave stands open to the sky;
and there she lies together with
the shattered limbs and bleeding mouths
and eyes that nevermore shall see.*

Another scribbled page was inscribed: *On Seeing Mersa Matruh Again After Five Years. . . .*

*So many years have slowly drifted by
but seeing you again below this hill
Whereon I stand—I know at once that I
have not forgotten you, and also still
remember all your little streets that run
down to the Bay, thru soft and snow-white sand;
And gentle evenings when the setting sun
Caressed your walls with magic hand.
But in the Bay, instead of lazy craft
I see—destroyers, transport ships and more;
and in the streets where little children laughed
tanks thunder by and shout, “To war, to war!”
So close your eyes and brush away your tears,
they'll come to you again—the peaceful years.**

That night in leaguer, as Doc MacMillan attended to my foot, the Colonel came over and said he wanted me to take my troop out when the leaguer broke in the morning, to make contact with the tanks of the 22nd Armoured Brigade who were leaguering several miles from our position, but whose exact location was not clear. The brigade was moving to take up a new battle position at Bir Hatiel Genadel, and the C.O. did not want to risk running into our friends in the half-light of dawn.

I moved off with two other Honeys in the first grey light. We had no great difficulty in finding the Crusaders of the City of London Yeomanry, who were still in leaguer when we reached them.

I was directed to the commanding officer, and told him where the Brigade tanks were heading so that when he moved he would not cross their line of march. He told me he had two patrols out to the north and north-west and indicated with a sweep of his arm the direction in which he had sent them.

“Then there's nothing out this way, sir?” I asked, pointing to the north-east, towards which I would be going to rejoin my squadron on the march.

“No,” he replied. “If you come across anything over that way it's not likely to be friendly.”

I saluted, and left him. In the east the sky was red with the

* These verses were composed by Captain Browne, Royal Tank Regiment, who was subsequently taken prisoner.

promise of day, a mist hung over the desert thickened by the dust churned up by the passing of many vehicles in the still air. Suddenly, out of this obscurity, two shapes emerged. I was, I suppose, less than two miles from the C.L.Y. leaguer. I halted the troop and stared through my binoculars . . . no identification pennants, no wireless masts, turrets clamped down, and the low, squat lines of the panzer.

We edged a little closer. There was no movement from the two tanks which had their backs towards me facing east. The nearer I got the more they looked like Mark IIIs. But I was still not sure—chiefly because the last thing I expected to see just there were two isolated panzers. But by now the unexpected was commonplace. I signalled to my other tanks to halt and stay where they were. I was going to make dead sure what those two vehicles were before attacking them. Telling Whaley to speed up, I rushed headlong towards them on a diagonal course at about 30 miles an hour. If they were Jerry and they saw me I would have plenty of speed to play with, and my course would make me a difficult target.

I kept going towards them until, with my naked eye, I could count the one, two, three, four, five, six bogie wheels. I had closed to within 200 yards and I had satisfied myself beyond doubt that they were Mark IIIs.

I watched their turrets anxiously as my Honey wheeled round behind them, but they did not swing round after me. I got on the air to my troop tanks, told them there were two Mark IIIs and they were to open fire as soon as I rejoined them. The troop corporal called back immediately to tell me that his breech block had jammed open and he could not get it clear. I ordered him back to the C.L.Y. leaguer as fast as he could go to get some assistance. Unless we were lucky enough to knock out those panzers with our first shots, I did not fancy our chances much if it came to a short-range duel.

I pulled up about 30 yards away from the troop sergeant's tank, gave him a thumbs-up sign, and then our cannons blazed out. I put four shots into the nearest Jerry, and saw the crew baling out. By this time the other had moved off in a hurry and was jinking about the desert its turret swinging round towards me as it moved. I could see the tracers of our shells whizzing past it, and one or two went ricochetting high into the air. I saw a Crusader speeding across the desert towards us and I thought "That's fine. New we'll get the bastard." Then I looked again, my heart coming into my

mouth in sheer horror. An officer was sitting on front of the Crusader waving a red flag. I knew immediately what I had done.

"Cease fire," I yelled at my gunner, and then into the mike at the troop sergeant.

I had knocked out one of our own tanks. I jumped down and ran over to the approaching Crusader, and together we went to the shattered tank.

Three men were clustered round it. Scared and bewildered and shocked. One was holding his arm tight against his side.

There was one man short.

All the way over I kept muttering to myself: "Don't let anybody be dead. Don't let anybody be dead."

I ran to the little group. A young officer was in command. He waited for me with blanched face.

"You bloody fool. You've killed my gunner."

I hated him at that moment as much as he hated me. He wanted to hit me. I could see that. I didn't say anything. If he didn't understand how I felt, there was nothing I could say would make him.

They got a rope around the figure lying in the turret. I had neither the strength nor the will to help. Perhaps he wasn't dead. Perhaps he was just unconscious. The officer might have made a mistake. There was still a little hope.

Out of the turret-top they hauled a lad's body—red hair, fair skin, freckled face. As they pulled him out, the head rolled sideways and two, wide-open, empty eyes looked straight into mine.

In that moment I touched the rock-bottom of experience.

Somewhere behind me, from a world that I thought could never be the same again, a voice called me. I looked round and saw that they had brought my Honey over and the operator was saying "The major wants you on the set, sir."

Listlessly I climbed into the tank to hear "Withers". "Listen, Bob, I know what's happened there. It's not the first time and it won't be the last. You can't worry about that now. You've got a job to do. There's a Jerry column crossing our front. You're to rejoin immediately. Get on with it."

I said into the mike "Driver advance," and drove away without another look. Later I wrote my apologies and sent them over to the C.L.Y. But the incident would never close for me.

Many years later I met a tall young man in a Fleet Street pub, who said pleasantly: "You won't remember me, but we have met before."

"I'm afraid I can't recall . . ."

"It was one early morning in the desert. I was in a Crusader that you knocked out."

For a moment or two I was speechless, living again the horror of that morning. Then I said: "Remember you! I wish to hell I could forget you."

His next words were unexpected: "Bloody good shooting," he said, grinning broadly. "There were four holes in the turret before we could even get the engine started. You must have had a damn fine gunner."

When I rejoined the battalion the enemy column had retreated behind the usual screen of guns, and we spent a whole day watching the effects of our field-guns and spraying the area ahead of our tanks with rather hopeful machine-gun fire. At nightfall we withdrew some 4 miles to the south-east and hoped fervently that the enemy would be doing the same in the opposite direction. It was now pretty apparent to us all that Rommel was pulling out, using these delaying tactics to extricate his forces as intact as possible. It was an effective move, and obviously we were not accomplishing our rôle of destruction. It would have been folly to press an attack against those anti-tank screens. They would very soon have reduced our numerical superiority in armour.

In leaguer that night I was dispirited and miserable, a red-haired, wide-eyed ghost my constant companion. What I needed now was a lot of action. I hoped I would get it. There were possibilities in the nightly orders. We were to re-occupy our battle position at Bir Hatiel Genadel and press on to Point 161, some miles to the north-west.

TWENTY-THIRD TO TWENTY-EIGHTH DAY

WE all thought this was going to be a hell of a day. The most nerve-racking and unpleasant form of encounter the tank man has to face is the frontal assault on a prepared position. We realized we couldn't just sit and watch all day, and we also knew that each anti-tank screen would be succeeded by another one the whole length of Rommel's retreat back along the coast. We were sustained, of course, by the thought that victory was in sight, and that the battles the enemy was making us fight were delaying

efforts to enable him to get away, not battles that he hoped to win. But that did not increase our desire to die bravely for the motherland.

There was another encouraging sign. The litter of the battle-field was now all German and Italian—abandoned supply dumps and headquarters, evacuated field hospitals, broken-down transport and guns . . . all told their tale of defeat and hasty departure.

When we reached our battle position on Point 161 we were all very intrigued by the news that the C.O. had gone off to Brigade for a conference. This always foreshadowed some new development, and our guess was that we were going to be regrouped and sent on some great swan around to the west to try and get at Rommel without having to bump our heads so painfully against the obstacles he dropped off behind him.

We were quite wrong. When the C.O. got back he summoned squadron commanders, who passed on the gen to troop commanders who handed it on to their troops and so on round the whole battalion. It was incredible news—incredible because we were kept in ignorance of the overall intention; we were to stay right where we were for three or four days and were not to move beyond a radius of 10 miles from our present position. During that time a further announcement about our future would be made.

The tension was released like a snapped bowstring. Most of us were a bit disappointed that we were not to be allowed to get on with it and get the whole thing over. It was frustrating too, to have no information about the enemy or his movements.

I took my Honey and ran restlessly about the desert. The Germans had pulled out during the night, and every now and again we stopped to inspect the empty disorder left by the retreating forces.

One forlorn tent had obviously been a casualty clearing station, and it was there I picked up my first bit of loot. For the past week or so my hips and shoulders had become daily more tender through sleeping on unyielding, often rocky, ground and even more unyielding armour-plating. When I saw a folding iron bedstead in a corner of the tent I knew it was just what I wanted. We pitched it on the back of the tank on top of the bedding rolls. For some mysterious reason it interfered considerably with wireless reception, but after giving some thought to the issues involved, I decided to keep the bed.

It was, possibly, a measure of the enemy's desperation that he

now stepped up the air attack on the advancing British. There were several Stuka raids every day, and more and more of his Messerschmitts made suicidal attempts to interfere with the R.A.F.'s bombing runs. Returning to leaguer with my new-found bed we were awe-stricken spectators of a fierce dogfight above a pack of Bostons. One Boston broke formation with smoke streaming from it. We could imagine the terror in that plane as the pilot wrestled desperately with the controls. Suddenly the plane went into a vertical dive and plummeted straight down into the sand in a holocaust of black smoke. High up in the sky the oblique rays of the sun lit up pinkly a swaying parachute and the dark blob beneath it. There was only one, and we watched it drift away to the east.

A few minutes later my operator, sitting alongside me on the turret top as we made our way slowly back to the battalion, gave a yell and pointed. Coming straight for us, not more than 50 feet above the top of the scrub, were two fighters. We did not wait to identify them, but dropped simultaneously into the bottom of the turret—to the great consternation of the gunner, who was peacefully reading a Western. He was even more bewildered a second or two later when the turret rattled like a kettle drum as the machine-gun bullets pinged against it. There was a great roaring, and through the open top we had a swift and frightening glimpse of the undersides of the two planes and their black-crossed wings as they skimmed the top of the tank.

We were annoyed about this. We considered it an unsporting gesture to introduce this new element into armoured warfare. Being attacked from the air was, in our view, the prerogative of "B" echelons, the Royal Army Service Corps and staff cars.

By the time we had got back to Point 161 the columns of tanks were already forming up to go into close leaguer. The fact that there was to be no march back that night was a clear indication that the vicinity was pretty clear of enemy. A good deal of re-organization had already started during the afternoon. Seven new Honeys had been delivered to 3R.T.R., and crews were coming up during the night.

That night's leaguer, with the tenseness and the fear gone from the atmosphere, was almost like being back in base dépôt. We were even allowed to make a brew before last light. While we all slept, blissfully as far as I was concerned on my spring bed, a good deal of paper work must have been going on at battalion H.Q., for

morning brought the news that the battalion had been reorganized in 3 squadrons of 12 tanks each and that "C" Squadron would be commanded by Captain Crisp.

At the dawn dispersal Maegraith and I moved our Honeys out into the desert, away from the rest of the squadron, for a joint picnic breakfast. The move was inspired by the fact that Maegraith had acquired a miraculous food parcel from Australia. It had come up with the rations during the night, and it was consideration rather than greed on our part that prompted us to seek isolation in order to eat it. With a good deal of ingenuity the contents of the parcel could be persuaded to provide 8 men with a little unaccustomed luxury. It could not have been stretched beyond that number without disseminating every advantage it held for us and without destroying the intentions of the sender.

Replete with strange flavours, Harry and I were strolling aimlessly through the scrub, occasionally investigating the succulents sprouting in the sand and which seemed to bear a marked resemblance to the specimens I had once dug from the hard soil of Namaqualand for Kew Gardens, when we were startled to hear a curious throbbing noise in the air overhead. A few seconds earlier we had heard the quick barking of ack-ack guns, but had paid no attention. As we looked up anxiously at an empty sky the distant throbbing grew rapidly into an angry buzzing, which got louder and louder every second. Something was coming at us fast—and it was completely invisible.

Harry and I looked at each other in alarm, and without a word threw ourselves flat on our faces. There was a great thud on the earth nearby and we waited with beating hearts for the explosion to tear us apart. When nothing happened we lifted our heads cautiously to see the crews of the Honeys laughing their heads off about 50 yards away.

Peering about in some bewilderment, we saw a foot-deep indentation in the soil; lying on the edge of it was the top half of an unexploded ack-ack shell. It had come whirling and buzzing down from 10,000 feet, and had missed us by about 24 inches. I was considerably shaken by the almost personal discrimination of this episode.

"Hell, Harry! When you come to work out the mathematical chances involved, that shell was several million times closer to us than an 88 going past your left ear. The bloody stuff is certainly following me around."

Back in the Honey the adjutant came on the air to tell me that "C" Squadron would be required to send out patrols to the north and north-west within the 10-mile limit. I sent off the three troop commanders with their tanks, and took the remaining two out myself.

Two or three miles out I got a sudden fright when I saw the solitary tank nestling in the scrub. With memories of the previous dreadful morning in the forefront of my mind I approached it gingerly until I could establish beyond doubt that it was a Crusader—an abandoned Crusader. I directed Whaley alongside and then jumped across, landing on the soft cushion of the bedding rolls which were still in place and which included a very fine-looking officer's valise, with his name and regiment painted on the canvas cover. It was a 22nd Armoured Brigade tank, but the officer's name, for reasons which will become apparent, must remain unrevealed.

Everything pointed to a very rapid departure of commander and crew. Most of their personal possessions were still stowed neatly aboard. The curious thing was that we could find nothing wrong with the vehicle, and we looked in vain for shell holes and other evidence of sudden disaster. Whaley finally discovered that the Crusader had run out of petrol.

There was some £20,000 worth of material lying there, and I reported its position back to H.Q. so that it could in due course be recovered and put in action again. Then I transferred the valise and one or two other personal items to the Honey, thinking that the crew would appreciate getting them back the next morning.

At 3 o'clock in the afternoon the patrols were called in, and we returned to hear some startling news. There had been another brigade conference, from which the C.O. had emerged with the information that 4th Armoured Brigade was to return to the Delta in three days' time to re-organize and re-equip for employment on another front. Our conglomerate gasp of amazement and pleasure was quickly stifled by his next announcement that 3R.T.R. were to take over the remaining Honeys of 8th Hussars and as many of 5R.T.R. as we needed and stay on in the desert. Later on we would be relieved by the Royal Gloucester Hussars, who were on their way forward.

If there had been any enemy forces within a mile of the leaguer that night they surely would have heard the communal murmur of speculation as every trooper, private and bombardier, not to

mention every subaltern and colonel, discussed the latest turn of events and made unlikely guesses about "another front". There were certainly a great many possibilities.

To celebrate the occasion I unrolled the very posh valise I had found, intending to make a thick mattress of luxury on which to spend such a significant night. Already, I have no doubt, our minds were reaching ahead to the fleshpots of Cairo and Alex. As I unrolled the sleeping bag a pair of neatly folded pyjamas fell out on to the sand. Brown silk pyjamas. It was too much for me. I stripped naked and slid into the cool, sumptuousness of the silk and so into careless slumber. For a few, brief hours the war was over.

In the morning, before we dispersed to our watchful stations, I wrapped up the valise and sent it by scout car to Brigade H.Q., to be forwarded to 22nd Armoured Brigade with a note to the owner explaining what I had done and expressing my gratitude at the pleasure he had unwittingly provided.

To add to the general atmosphere of half-term, the battalion office lorry arrived together with a special ration truck full of bread and fresh meat—the first for 25 days. It had only just made it, as the replenishment convoy had been dive-bombed and machine-gunned for the third time in three days. Two of the lorries had been destroyed on the way up that morning, and it speaks volumes for the high standard of evasive action reached by the vehicles' crews that only one man had been wounded. It was a strange reversal of fortunes that the tank crews should now be commiserating with the "B" echelon troops on account of the bad time they were having.

The warm, midday air of the desert hung heavy with the odours of a variety of stews as each crew prepared its own exclusive concoction. My lot settled for steak and kidney pie without, of course, the kidney. It was still lying hot in our bellies when a warning order came that 3R.T.R. was to be ready to move at 0800 hours the next morning.

Honeys from the other two regiments continued to arrive during the afternoon, and by nightfall we were practically at full strength for the first time since we had crossed The Wire. Also during the afternoon I was becoming aware of an increasing irritation all over my stomach and around my groins. Maegraith suggested it was the result of eating too much rich food, and I was half-inclined to believe him.

I scratched vigorously without any effect, and when it became

time for me to have my foot washed and bandaged I complained to the doctor about the continuous, maddening itchiness.

"Let's have a look," he said. He took one superficial glance at my nakedness and then burst into loud laughter.

"Where did you find her?" he asked me.

"What d'you mean, where did I find her? Find who?"

"The bedouin bint you've got hold of. Don't you know what's the matter with you?"

"Of course I don't. And I don't know what's so bloody funny about it, either."

"Crabs, my dear Bob. You've got a nice little packet of crabs."

"Oh, no! How the hell . . ."

Suddenly I remembered. The brown silk pyjamas. I told MacMillan about them. He seemed to think it was a large joke.

"Never mind the laughter, Doc. What the devil do I do about it? Have you got anything to put on?"

"Well, what you need is some blue ointment. Unfortunately, we don't have any. I suppose somebody at the War Office did not put it down on his list of likely casualties in a desert war." And he giggled away infuriatingly.

"For Christ's sake, Doc, it's no joke. What the hell am I supposed to do? You're the bloody medical authority around here. It's your responsibility to keep the fighting man fighting fit."

"Well, you can try rubbing yourself with petrol. That might do the trick. Especially this high octane stuff. But for God's sake don't strike a match while you're doing it."

I knew I could never get him to take the thing seriously, so after a few appropriate observations on the subject of Hippocratic oaths, I went back to my tank.

As soon as it was dark I filled a small tin with petrol and hobbled out into the night. Out of sight of the leaguer I poured the petrol over my stomach and rubbed it in hard. A few seconds later I was bellowing with pain and running for the leaguer as fast as my big toe would let me, shouting for water.

The next morning, together with orders for the move, we were supplied with some rare information about the state of the campaign. I crayonned the dispositions of the opposing forces on to the talc covering my map, and relayed the gen' at the first opportunity to "C" Squadron's officers and N.C.O.s.

The enemy had been beaten back to the Gazala line, where they

were making a stand and effectively holding up the pursuing Indian Division. For two days the latter had been trying to break through, but the Afrika Korps had stood firm and, backed by the combined remnants of the panzer divisions, had inflicted heavy casualties on the attackers. The momentum of the pursuit had come to a halt.

Back at Army they had re-assessed the position in the light of Rommel's stubbornness, pigeon-holed the movement orders for 4th Armoured Brigade back to the Delta, and given new orders which involved an initial and immediate advance of 15 miles on a bearing of 256 degrees. I made a cross on my map to see where this would take us. It appeared to plonk us down in the middle of an empty and apparently useless piece of desert about half-way between Bir Hakeim and Gazala.

Obviously no decisive result could be expected just from spending a night in the open desert, and it was not difficult to perceive what the Army commander's intentions were—something a good deal more conclusive and dramatic than a 15-mile march. I studied again the yellow rings denoting the enemy positions, and our own red lines and arrows. Just a little prolongation of the red and a curve round to the north, and the 4th Armoured would be directly in the rear of the Afrika Korps.

I did not tell my little conference of the probabilities. It was too sudden a change from contemplation of the delights of Shephard's, Groppi's and the Burka to be good for morale. It wasn't doing mine any good, either.

At 9.15 we set off on our 15-mile journey at a relaxed 10 or 12 miles an hour, studying the surrounding desert purely from the point of view of the scenery and not with any special vigilance. It is comforting to know the enemy is 30 to 40 miles away. An hour and a half later we were taking up a rather unnecessary battle position, in the scheduled locality, facing west.

The fact that the C.O. had to go to Brigade H.Q. to take over while the brigadier was away at a Divisional conference was an indication that something fairly portentous was being cooked up in the rear areas, which was much as I had anticipated.

The return of the brigadier coincided with a report from our forward reconnaissance that 50 enemy tanks were approaching our position. We prepared, rather flap-happy, to do unexpected battle—only mildly surprised at the continued ability of the enemy to find more and more panzers, well above his reputed total strength.

Fortunately for the brigadier's plans a correction was soon forthcoming: "For 50 enemy tanks read 50 enemy camels."

To judge by the ensuing coming and going of colonels and scout cars and liaison officers, Gatehouse was full of potent information and intention. All that was released to us, however, was that the brigade had a little job to do, but would definitely be returning to the Delta in due course. This statement was supported by the despatch to rear areas of the dismounted 8th Hussars. I doubt whether many of us were deluded by this attempt to put a little sugar-coating on what was plainly going to be a rather bitter pill.

At this stage, influenced by the sudden change of plan or the too-sharp contrast of expectation and reality, I was becoming a little preoccupied by unpleasant forebodings. Or it may have been the long, steady drain on resources of will and energy and courage. In my mind (and I am sure I was one of many in thinking this) the battle was over. There was only the formality of mopping-up to be endured. Having survived a period when survival was subordinate to the immediate task and duty, and when exhilaration in accomplishment had been supplanted by something near to drudgery, I could find no enthusiasm or sense of purpose in a tomorrow in which death seemed to have become causeless.

There were other factors. I had had half a dozen tanks knocked out under me, I had seen tanks alongside me turned into incandescent tombs for the men trapped inside them, I had been sprayed with lead particles and God knows how many times I had escaped death by the smallest fraction of deviation in some gunner's aim; I had passed more or less unscathed through air filled with the flying steel of shell explosions and the indiscriminate hail of machine-gun fire. I tried to console myself by thinking that each battle presented exactly the same chances of individual survival or obliteration. But I felt my chances were running out; that I had used them all up.

In spite of the absence of positive information and the reassuring messages from brigade, I had little doubt that our next objective was the rear of the enemy position at Gazala, and I had a frightening certainty that I was going to be particularly involved in a way that would not affect anybody else. I had been afraid often enough before, but it had always been tempered by the conviction that, whatever happened to anybody else, disaster could not come to me. "It could not happen to me." It was, in fact, the basis of most

of my actions. Now, in a moment of realization that made me very afraid, I knew I had lost my immunity.

There was nothing to be done about it. I did not let it affect my behaviour. In the afternoon we watched with interest another Stuka raid on the supply vehicles that had come up with us. In this comparatively isolated spot, unprotected by the fighter umbrella that covered the main replenishment depôts, the dive-bombers pressed home their attacks with a good deal more determination than they had previously displayed during the campaign. The high, terrifying whine of those evil-looking planes, reaching a crescendo of fearsomeness as they plunged vertically downwards towards their targets, took me back to the bad days in Greece.

Soon the black smoke of burning lorries was rising above the dirt thrown up by the exploding bombs. To add to the confusion, an ammunition lorry started to explode in cascades of high explosive, tracers and Very lights. The firework display went on well into the night without, fortunately, attracting any further attention from the Luftwaffe—notoriously ill-equipped for night operations.

I came away from the evening talk at the C.O.'s tank depressed and irritable, plagued by the blasted insects which seemed to be thriving on their diet of high octane spirit, my foot squelching at every step in its ooze of blood, conscious of an unreasoning sense of doom. There had been no fresh information except that the Colonel had to report to brigade at 7.45 the next morning.

That, I thought as I wandered through the dark lines of tanks to my own Honey, would be when we would hear all about it; it was all being kept carefully from us until the last possible moment; it was certainly going to be something pretty unpleasant.

Back at my tank I glanced at my watch and told the operator to get the B.B.C.'s 9 o'clock news. He dangled a pair of ear-phones over the side of the turret and, as usual when they heard the first pips, those men who were not too exhausted to move gathered round to listen to the familiar nostalgic voice. It was not only our sole direct link with the outside world and the rest of the war; it was very often our only source of information on the war in which we were taking part.

So we listened avidly to the communiqués and then, at the end of the Western Desert piece the suave voice said: "The immediate award of the Distinguished Service Order is announced to Lieutenant, acting Captain, R. J. Crisp, Royal Tank Regiment. Lieutenant Crisp is the former South African Test cricketer."

There was a moment of complete incomprehension at this sudden intimate announcement from thousands of miles away, and then I felt the hands clapping me on the back and heard the many congratulations. It wasn't the award that startled me as much as the circumstances surrounding our hearing it . . . the barren desert, the enemy lying in wait, and that other world of B.B.C. studios and Alvar Liddells and the top end of Regent Street. I was under no illusions as to why it had got such top-level treatment. Cricket; the English and their cricket.

I did not place a particularly high value on medals. I had seen too many curious awards. But I would have been singularly unimpressionable if I did not, in all the circumstances, find it a memorable moment. It did not do much to allay my curious feeling of impending disaster, but it altered my approach to it considerably. I suppose that's what medals are for.

More from force of habit than for any extraneous reason, we went through the routine of the dawn dispersal. We did not even contemplate an air-raid. The C.O. came back from his early morning visit to brigade, while we were cleaning the breakfast utensils in the sand, with orders to move on a bearing of 350 degrees for 12 miles. This was almost due north; and studying my map, I saw this would place us at the southern end of the Indian Division's position in front of Gazala. "My God," I thought, "they're going to use us in a frontal attack to support the infantry. We're not Matildas or Valentines. Ah, well. . . ."

There was a slight delay while the new arrivals, the Gloucester Hussars, took up their position on the line of march, and then we set off, reaching our destination at 11 o'clock without incident and without sight of anything except the criss-cross of many tracks in the sand.

The brigade disposed itself in three close-knit regimental groups, leaving us all more than a little puzzled at the specific order not to take up battle positions but to hold ourselves in a state of readiness. We wondered at the subtle distinction which kept us, if not in a state of readiness, at least in a state of curiosity. This was not dispelled by another summons for the C.O. to attend a conference at 2 o'clock.

He was back in half an hour, and at last the big secret came out . . . "4th Armoured Brigade will move south on a bearing of 193 degrees for 21 miles to locality Bir Zeidem in preparation for move west and north to Bir Halegh el Eleba on 15/12/41." This was

something; and with not much more than a mental reservation on why the hell it was necessary to travel 12 miles north in order to go 21 miles south, we headed our Honeys towards the open desert away from the embattled divisions.

By 5.30 we had completed the first part of our journey. We stayed strung out wide and open across these wide, open spaces until nightfall, when we went into close leaguer feeling more like a patrol of the Long Range Desert Group than an entire armoured brigade.

This impression was consolidated by the orders for the following morning—35 miles due west at 15 miles in the hour. I linked all these great moves into enemy country very closely with my own feelings of foreboding, but as "C" Squadron set off at the head of this great flotilla of tanks and lorries it was impossible not to be thrilled at this deep penetration of more or less unknown territory. The last few miles were literally off my operations map, which stared blankly up at me without any of the usual ridges and wadis and escarpments.

We started at 7 o'clock. To traverse 15 miles across-country over unpredictable going in one hour means going pretty well flat-out whenever possible. As we roared across the desert, I was very conscious of the great martial array streaming along behind me and the endless, sky-filled horizon before me which never came nearer. We were all caught up in this excitement of the unknown and the exhilaration of speed, multiplied a hundred-fold by the knowledge of what we were doing and the uncertainty of the morrow when we would steal up behind the enemy's back.

Two hours later I led the way down a steep escarpment, the existence of which was not acknowledged on my map. At the bottom, after the clumsy 3-tonners had lurched their way down the slope, a halt was called for replenishment. We had come just 28 miles.

By 10 o'clock, and on the move again, I had put my map-case away. It was of no further use to me. In another half-hour the course was changed to 6 degrees and we wheeled round in a vast right-angle and headed north towards the coast—and the Afrika Korps.

Far out on our right flank a troop of armoured cars of The Royals on reconnaissance had reported being shelled while stuck in swampy ground. We pushed on a little less carefree as a result, but still fast enough to complete a leg of 32 miles in four hours.

The paltry mound of earth that was Bir Halegh el Eleba raised itself above the scrub ahead of us at 3 o'clock. Around it in a great square the brigade took up its battle position, with 3R.T.R. forming the northern face and 5R.T.R. and the Gloucester Hussars on east and west respectively. The square was closed by an infantry battalion, the Tower Hamlet Rifles, of whom we had never heard, and the gaps on the corners were filled by the armoured cars and Bren carriers.

It was a strange feeling, lying out there in the open, to realize that the enemy whom we had so long thought of as coming from the west now lay to the east. Information about his reaction to our move was negligible and we hoped that information about us was just as sparse.

In the late afternoon a single German recce plane had swooped overhead and then flown off northwards in a great hurry. I wondered what his report would be when he got back to base, and whether anybody would believe him. Probably not.

Then there was a call for assistance from an outlying patrol of The Royals, who reported they were being attacked by a column of 20 M.E.T. with 75-mm. guns. "B" Squadron was sent off to investigate, and for a while we listened to the quick inter-flow of chatter between the troops and the squadron commander as they came in sight of the enemy. There was a brief, long-range engagement before the column moved over the northern skyline.

Night came down on us without any further excitement and we contracted into our leaguer formation as usual, but with a guard mounted in each tank and a screen of infantry pickets posted round the perimeter. "This," I thought to myself, "is real Injun territory."

We were given a Situation Report to pass on to the troops. It contained two items of interest . . . the Indian Division was being hard-pressed by panzer counter-attacks from the Gazala redoubt; one of our lorries, broken down on the march some miles south of the leaguer area, reported putting to flight seven Italian lorries which had come nosing around apparently to give him a helping hand. The same driver also reported seeing a large column of transport to his south moving from west to east. If these were real transport and not a herd of camels, the direction they were travelling in could only mean that the enemy was still sublimely ignorant of the presence of a brigade of British tanks in the area.

All the Honeys were very short of petrol. None of them had

enough in their fuel tanks to see them through a battle if one developed in the morning. The replenishment on the march had emptied all but one or two of the accompanying petrol lorries. It was a ticklish situation. Obviously, in the conduct of any future operations, fuel was a decisive factor, and Gatehouse decided to move the whole brigade back some miles to the south at first light to connect up with "B" echelon, which was following on in the night. One of the remaining lorries containing petrol was to be sent to 3R.T.R.

I didn't much care for this last bit of information, but thought no more about it and wandered over to Dr. MacMillan's staff car. He looked rather anxiously at my sodden sock as I pulled it off.

"I'm getting worried about this foot of yours, Bob. You're losing too much blood."

"It's not that that's worrying me. It's getting bloody sore."

"I ought to send you back, you know. What do you think?"

It was an opportunity. For a few minutes I tossed the thought around in my mind. The fullness of an eventful day and the tingling excitement of being right there behind the enemy lines had kept my mind free of doubts and fears. Now I could balance my premonitions against an opening for escaping from them. It was a near thing.

"Tell you what, Doc. If my foot hasn't got any better by tomorrow night, I'll go back."

"All right, then; let's leave it at that. I think it would be a wise thing to do. I'm not sure I shouldn't have made you do it before."

But it was already too late.

Orders for the next morning's move had reached "C" Squadron by the time I got back to my tank. There was a supplementary order which caused a good deal of comment—"all tanks of 'C' Squadron to be refilled with petrol from remaining stocks."

"Here we go," I thought, as I spread my blankets on the now slightly-battered bedstead and listened to the half-worried, half-jocular chatter of the crews; "this is it."

As I stretched out, the transport sergeant came up to tell me he was going to start filling up.

"O.K., sergeant," I said. "What about the other squadrons?"

"I've had no instructions about them. Only 'C' Squadron, sir."

"I see. Oh, well; good night, sergeant. Don't make too much bloody row."

It seemed I had hardly got my eyes closed when I felt the hand

shaking my shoulder. I came out of sleep grunting and cursing. I recognized an N.C.O. from the Colonel's tank.

"What the hell is it now, corporal? What's the time, anyway?"

"Sorry to wake you, sir. It's only 11 o'clock. Message from the brigadier. You are to report at his command car at 0515 hours tomorrow, sir, with the C.O. The Colonel says will you pick him up at 5."

"Right, Corporal. Tell your tank guard to come and wake me at quarter to.... Good night."

THE LAST DAY

I FELT the rough hands shaking me and heard the urgent voice close to my ear: "Wake up, sir, wake up. It's nearly five o'clock." I climbed quickly out of sleep and the warm blankets with an immediate awareness of what I had to do. The bitter night air poured over me like a cold shower, and the rows of tanks stood out black against the stars. I stumbled over to battalion H.Q. where I found the Colonel washing in a canvas basin. When he had done I scooped up a couple of handfuls and splashed them over my face. The Colonel handed me his towel, and when I was dry we walked together deep into the heart of the leaguer, where the brigade H.Q. vehicles were clustered. It was a silent walk; the C.O. knew as much about things as I did.

A young liaison officer led us to the command truck and we stepped through a blanketed doorway into the sudden light of the interior. Blinking my eyes, I saw Alec Gatehouse and his brigade major, David Silvertop, with two other officers, hunched over a map. We saluted and were greeted cheerfully by the brigadier.

Gatehouse wasted no time. Putting the tip of his pencil in the middle of a long oval crayon mark, he said:

"There's the enemy. The Indian Div. is there." (A jab with the pencil.) "They are under considerable pressure from counter attacks. We are lying here." (He pointed to a cross on the map about 30 miles west of the enemy position.) "It's our job to relieve the pressure on the Indian Div. and, if possible, bring Rommel's tanks to battle. Unfortunately the brigade's nearly out of petrol. We've got enough for a limited operation, a reconnaissance-in-force, while the rest of us pull back to get replenished later this morning. I have decided to send out a small party to make a demon-

stration in rear of the enemy. There will be a squadron of The Royals, your squadron of Honeys, Bob, and a troop of anti-tank guns. One petrol lorry will go with you. You are not to get committed to a set battle, but you must act boldly."

He looked straight at me as he said this and I nodded briefly, unhappily. The old reconnaissance-in-force . . . the armoured cars for the reconnaissance, the Honeys for the force. I had a pretty good idea what that would mean. The brigadier's voice went on evenly:

"I can't give you any instructions about what you do when you encounter the enemy. That's for you to decide on the spot. It will depend on the enemy's reaction. If he attacks you in force, David, pull back, but"—and this is where he looked at me again—"I want you to act boldly. David will be in command of the party and will maintain communication with me. Any questions?"

I asked about the wireless net between the armoured cars and my Honeys, and it was arranged to get our sets on net while we were getting ready to go. My C.O. said he would keep one set in the adjutant's tank on our frequency. Silvertop gave me the bearing on which we would march and the order of march, and said we would leave at 6.30. Alec Gatehouse wished us good luck; we all saluted and left him in the darkness as he switched off the light and opened the door.

The darkness of night was going grey at the edges as we split up and went back to our respective vehicles. I called a quick squadron conference to tell them where we were going, and sent all operators to their sets to get on net. The faces around me, pale in the pale light, registered no emotion. "When we get there," I ended, "I'll be able to tell you what we're going to do, not before. Right; start up."

Shortly after 6 we moved out of leaguer, leaving behind our shared security and the curious clusters of tank crews from the other squadrons who had come across to see what was going on.

When we were well clear of the massed lines of tanks and vehicles, we got into position for the start on the line of march. Three troops of Honeys were in line abreast ahead of me, each troop a fairly close-knit unit moving one up. On the left were ranged the squadron of Royals, well spaced out and hardly visible in the half-light. Directly behind me stood Silvertop's armoured car, and behind him the portee trucks of the anti-tank troop and the solitary bulk of the 3-tonner.

I don't think anybody was feeling particularly happy about the prospects, but I reckoned that by comparison with the two men in that petrol lorry the rest of us were pretty well off. I shuddered to think what would happen to them if anything really started. Every gun within range would open up on them, and they would be the obvious target for any Messerschmitt or Stuka which happened to pass overhead.

I was distinctly worried about the composition of this little force. There was nothing that the armoured cars could do in the way of reconnaissance that the Honeys couldn't do equally well, and I knew that if we were attacked by panzers they would have to beat it. Nor could I foresee any possible situation, unless we were completely surrounded, in which the anti-tank guns could be properly brought into action. The petrol lorry was no doubt essential in view of the mileage ahead of us, and was an expendable risk, but both it and the trucks carrying the 2-pounders would seriously hamper progress if we had to make a run for it. I was in no doubt at all that at some stage we would have to move pretty rapidly; I also had a pretty good idea who would have to cover the withdrawal.

Promptly at 6.30 we set off in open formation. I had hoped originally that the armoured cars would fan out ahead of the Honeys, but they stayed out on the left flank. The wireless net was as unsuccessful as I had expected it to be in those hurried circumstances. For a few minutes at the beginning of the move I was able to talk to David Silvertop and hear the armoured cars; then the whole thing went off net, and as a result we lost touch within the squadron as well. I told the operator to concentrate on getting my troops on net and never mind the armoured cars. My anticipation of the course of events did not involve instructions from the distant rear.

The sun came up red and clear straight ahead of us as we moved swiftly across an open, empty desert. The brilliance of the morning, the rare, invigorating air, and the sense of curiosity and excitement at the novel adventure, all combined to dispel my depression and dissatisfaction. In front of me the three clusters of Honeys pushed on purposefully; away on the left and in the rear the first rays of the sun made moving pink patches of the armoured cars against the dark green of the scrub still nursing the night. Behind, the trucks weaved through the rough going and the tall lorry lurched and swayed.

The sun rose higher, and still the land all round us stayed empty of movement. The rubble of Bir Temrad went past us and disappeared in the west. Then dimly, just before 10 o'clock, I saw the smudges and shapes on the eastern horizon stretching right along the perimeter of vision. At the same time the reports started coming back from the forward troops. I told them to slow down and keep a close watch on their front.

We crawled slowly forward, and every minute the blobs and shapes grew more clearly into vehicles and guns and tanks, ranged in a long crescent line along a ridge running southward from Gazala. We were pointed right at the middle of the hollow of the crescent. Straight ahead of me, looming above the other silhouettes on the skyline, was an enormous command vehicle looking like some double-storeyed caravan. That, I thought, must be where Rommel is.

We sneaked up to within two miles without apparently being noticed. Then I called a halt, and tried vainly to get in touch with Silvertop to find out what next. It was a fantastic situation. We were within the horns of a crescent, we could see men moving about and the muzzles of the field-guns pointing over to the east. We just sat there waiting for something to happen, not quite believing in the enemy soldiers unconcernedly washing up their breakfast plates and going disinterestedly about their camp chores. A big Mark IV came out of the cluster of vehicles and tanks on our extreme left and cruised slowly across to the opposite tip of the German position. It passed right across the front of the three troops of Honeys, and we could clearly see the crew sitting in their shirt sleeves on top of the turret. They looked over towards us without realization.

For another 10 minutes we sat there motionless, I looked at my watch. It was 10.15. I looked behind me and saw—a long way back—the yellow dots of armoured cars and the 3 or 4 wheeled vehicles. There was no communication with them. I got on the air to the C.O., with whom I had stayed in contact and who had ordered wireless silence in the battalion so that I could reach him at any time.

I told him what the situation was and that, as I was not in touch with Silvertop, I proposed to act on my own initiative. I asked him to pass on my remarks to David through the brigade wireless link.

The plan I had in mind was to make a charge in line abreast, straight towards the middle of the rear of the German position.

When we reached it we would swing north in line ahead, and run along the whole length of the enemy lines blazing away with everything we had before wheeling out and away at full speed. It was the sort of recklessness that was, in fact, pretty safe in execution. By the time the Jerries had woken up to what was happening we would be in the middle of them, every gun firing and every tank going flat out. None of their weapons would be ready for us; they were all directed towards the east and the Indian Division. They would not be able to engage us while we were right in their own position. By the time we swung out again there would be so much consternation and confusion, and we would be going so fast, that I had every prospect of getting away with it scot-free—without losing a single tank. Personally I had my eye on the big command wagon with secret hopes of a staff conference in progress as the Browning bullets ripped through the sides. It was the sort of plan which I could not properly describe over the air, but it was essential that it should be described and timed so that each tank commander knew what to do and when to do it, so that it would function perfectly even if something happened to me. I was about to summon troop commanders to a quick conference back at my tank (it would have to be darn quick) when one of them came on the air to report four enemy tanks moving out from the left and coming across his front.

As he spoke I could pick out the panzers sauntering through the scrub. They were a good deal nearer than the one that had preceded them, and all looked like Mark IVs with perhaps one Mark III. It did not seem possible that they could pass that close without identifying us. I had to make a quick change of plan. . . .

"Hullo, BOSCO, BOSCO calling. Four enemy tanks approaching from left. Attack them when in front of your position. Do not let them get away. BOSCO to BOSCO off."

In another minute or two all the squadron Honeys were in action. There was a wild flurry of bodies on the tops of the panzers as the crews dived for turrets or fell off on to the ground. They did not try to fight it out once they realized what was happening, but fled for the opposite perimeter. Two stayed behind, still and silent.

It was, of course, the end of that peaceful morning. The flap that followed in the German lines could be clearly seen with the naked eye. Men started running in all directions, vehicles started moving, and guns were pulled into position and switched round; the big

command vehicle started up and lumbered slowly and bumpily northwards and over the crest of the ridge. Then I spotted the panzers. 9 or 10 Mark IVs came down the ridge to our south, and we turned to meet them. I hoped that the armoured cars would be doing something about our rear, but I had no time to pay any attention in that direction. The panzers did not press home their attack. They sat on the forward slope beyond our effective range with the 37-mm., and lobbed shells all over us. We fired back as best we could, but our tracers made beautiful, harmless parabolas that pitched dustily in the sand or made wild ricochets as they bounced off armour plating.

It was not the sort of situation that could be continued indefinitely. I reckoned we had fulfilled everything that anybody could extract from "reconnaissance-in-force". As far as I could see, none of the Honeys had suffered any damage, but I knew that those Mark IV gunners, unlike field gunners, would be aiming directly at our tanks with their H.E. and inevitably hits would be scored. Our immediate safety lay in dispersal, and I was worried when I saw two Honeys almost touching each other, firing away like mad. I had already given the order to start pulling out when through the earphones came:

"Hullo, BOSCO. BOSCO Two calling. We've been hit and can't move. We're baling out. Two to BOSCO, over."

"BOSCO. O.K. Bale out and get on that Honey alongside. We're pulling back now. BOSCO, off."

I was watching them closely from about 100 yards away, and to my great relief saw their tank reversing slowly and then move forward and wheel away. It happened fairly often that drivers and commanders, after their tank had taken a direct hit, leapt to the conclusion that they were immobile. Then I saw the explosion right under the front of the second Honey and, as the dust and smoke cleared, there was the track sagging limply. The tank gave a few abortive jerks as the track flailed round the driving sprocket and then the crew started to clamber out—commander, operator, gunner from the turret, driver from his little opening in front. To my dismay I saw it was Harry Maegraith.

They grouped together at the back of their Honey, ducking at each burst of H.E. which was falling thickly all round us. I noticed that the other troops were moving back westwards, and I waved to Harry and his crew, at the same time directing my driver towards them.

They left the shelter of their tank as they saw me coming, and ran towards me. Every now and again one of them would fall flat, and I thought "He's had it"; then he would get up and keep on running and I could not help smiling as I realized that what was making them fall was nothing but jelly knees. They all reached the Honey miraculously unhurt, and clambered up on the back. I leaned over to make sure they were all on.

"O.K., Harry?"

"O.K., Bob."

Still leaning over the back of the turret I put the mike to my lips and said, "Driver advance. Hard left." I had the mike to my mouth when I heard the enormous crack right next to my head. In the same split second I felt my knees buckling under me and the darkness falling upon me.

There was no pain; just a numbing shock and a feeling of great astonishment. I knew immediately that I had been hit in the head. I felt myself sliding down to the bottom of the turret. On the way down and out I had only one thought in my mind, and I wrestled with it savagely. I had given the order "Driver advance, hard left". If I didn't add the necessary word "Steady" to straighten him out on the right course we would keep on going round and round in circles on the same spot for ever.

It became an obsession. I had to say "steady". The microphone was still in my hand. With a supreme effort I got it near to my mouth. The word was there in my mind and I forced it on to my tongue. I could feel it there, a solid word. But I could not push it out of my lips. Then I felt the mike being taken from my hand and heard dimly my operator's voice saying something to the driver. It was all right. There was no need to struggle any more.

I was down on the floor of the turret, my legs crumpled untidily beneath me. The gunner was fussing about my head with some shell dressings. He was wasting his time. I could feel life slipping away from me. I knew, beyond a shadow of doubt, that I was going to die. The darkness I was sinking into was the darkness of the grave. I waited for the big experience. Death was the biggest experience in life. Everybody knew that. It was not something that people looked forward to. I was afraid of death, yet here I was dying, ready to be frightened, bewildered, overjoyed, dismayed. I waited quite deliberately for something to happen. I did not know whether it would be a vision of hell or shining immortality. Strangest of all, I didn't care a damn. Nothing happened. I waited,

and nothing happened. The blackness grew deeper round me and at the edges a dark red light glowed. It was a clear impression. But as I went out into eternal darkness the last thought I had was . . . death is easy.

I did not die. A long time after—I did not know how long—I heard the tank noises and opened my eyes. I saw the gunner's face, and the relief on it as he saw that I was back from unconsciousness. Behind him I could see the khaki-clad legs going up to the bright ring of light of the open turret. Then the pain started. Somewhere round my left ear and, worse still, my legs.

I tried a word or two hesitantly. The sound came out and the gunner bent his ear near my mouth.

"What's happening?"

"Everything's all right, sir. We're on our way back. We've asked for an M.O. to be sent out to meet us."

"Mr. Maegraith and the others?"

"They're O.K., sir. All on the back of the tank. Captain Joly's taken over the squadron."

"What's the time?"

"Nearly 2 o'clock."

"Where are we? Are we near brigade?"

"We're on our way back. There's no sign of the enemy now. We think they pulled out along the coast road. The C.O. says the brigadier is sending out an M.O. with an armoured car escort. They should be here any minute now, sir. Don't you worry. You'll be all right."

He held my head cradled in his arms. Every now and again he changed the shell dressing and I would feel the warm trickle running over my shoulder and down my back.

Time and the tank rolled on, and I could hear the operator's voice distantly in terse sentences on the wireless. Pain worked its way up from my legs and down from my head until it engulfed my whole body. I longed for unconsciousness. Now that I knew that I was not going to die or, at least that I had a chance of living if I could get some proper attention soon enough, life was once more a precious thing. But I remembered the sensation of death and its nothingness. The thought of it no longer alarmed me, nor ever would again. As I lay crumpled in the bottom of the tank I knew only that pain was real.

"Try and move me a little," I begged the gunner. "My legs . . ."

I felt him trying to lift me and struggled mentally to help him.

There was no response from my muscles; not even an illusion of movement.

"Where's that bloody M.O.? Can't they hurry him up? Tell the C.O. I can't go on much longer."

The message went up to the operator and out over the air. Poor gunner. I could feel his sympathy and desperation as the long afternoon wore on. Once we stopped, and I heard the voices outside the tank and thought "Thank God. They're here at last." But it was the petrol lorry pulling up alongside to refill. We rumbled on, and the sky through the turret grew pink and then dark above me. In the bottom of the tank I tried desperately not to give way to despair, not to sound too pathetic. The left side of my head felt like hot metal poured on raw flesh, and from the waist down I was slumped in a pool of pain which I knew would stop if I could only crawl out of it.

At last I heard the operator shout down into the turret. "We can see the brigade, sir. We'll be there in two minutes." It was just after 5 o'clock.

The Honey came to a stop, and as the engine switched off I heard the voices outside and recognized Doc MacMillan's. Whaley turned round in his little compartment and said, "You'll be O.K. now, sir," and I saw the operator's legs disappearing above me to be replaced by the rosy face of the doctor.

"For God's sake get me out of here, Doc."

He looked at me speculatively for a moment or two, went "Hmmmm . . ." and said to somebody outside: "We'll have to take him out through the front."

Somehow they shovelled me out through the driver's compartment and the front flap on to the ready stretcher. As they prised my legs out straight the relief was so immediate and so intense that I almost forgot the wound in my head. But the flame of it started as I put my head back on the pillow, and I twitched on to my side.

"Hell's bells, Mac, it feels as though my bloody ear's been torn off."

Macmillan lifted up the first-aid dressing and took a quick look. "That," he said briefly, "is the least of your troubles."

They took me to an ambulance, where I spent the worst night of my life. I got a clear impression from each of the visitors who came to see me that I was not expected to survive it. The Colonel came in to tell me that Division were arranging to have an aeroplane

laid on to take me back to the Delta first thing in the morning (the staff at Divisional H.Q. actually did try to fix this, but without success). He also told me that a wireless message had been intercepted from the headquarters of the Afrika Korps saying that they were evacuating the Gazala position, and how lucky they were to escape "the steel trap". It was some compensation. I asked the Doctor about Harry Maegraith....

"He's all right. Don't you worry about him."

I knew he was lying, but did not press the point. Harry would have been along to see me if he had been able to. I did not want to make sure about it. Long, long afterwards I found out that they buried him the next morning in the cool sand of the desert. He had been killed instantaneously by the same shell that had hit me.

THE DAYS AFTER

DR. MACMILLAN looked quite surprised when he opened the door of the ambulance in the morning and saw me looking at him more or less intelligently.

"I'm afraid they can't raise a plane for you, Bob. The 'B' echelon convoy is going back in a few minutes, and the ambulance will take you to the nearest Casualty Clearing Station. They'll fix you up there, if you survive the journey. How are you feeling?"

"How d'you think?" I said.

I was in a hell of a mess, but I was far from dead. One trouble was that the only position that did not give me acute discomfort was sitting up. I could not lie on my back or the left side because of the wound in my head. I could not lie on my right side because, for some reason, my right hip was extremely painful (I had broken a bone in my hip). When I did sit up I felt sick, and each time I got sick it was as though my brains were being squeezed slowly through my skull.

I had no idea of the extent of the damage to my head; nor did anybody tell me. My left ear felt like a miniature furnace, but the doctor had made it clear that compared with the rest of it my ear was pretty insignificant. I agreed with Mac on one point—if anything was going to kill me it would be that 50-mile cross-country ride in the ambulance. At this stage I was more or less resigned to anything that could happen to me . . . just as long as it was something other than lying there motionless.

Outside, the Honeys started up and the roar of the nearest radials swelled into a crescendo of noise as all the tanks in the brigade warmed up before breaking leaguer. Voices came back to me from the driving cab of the ambulance, and I heard the engine start and felt the gentle vibration of the engine. An R.A.M.C. orderly—who had shared the night with me, poor chap—came in and tucked me up. The C.O. and a couple of other officers stood with the doctor to say goodbye to me, the door slammed and a second or two later the long lurching, swaying, bone-jarring journey began.

I was half in and half out of consciousness, but never far enough out to be beyond pain or awareness of the jerky, swaying world which enclosed me. The sides of the vehicle grew warm and I saw in my mind the sun rising bright in the heavens, pouring its light down on interminable miles of sand and scrub and the steep-descending wadis which seemed to tilt my intestines into my throbbing skull.

Once the convoy stopped for a break. I banged on the tin between me and the driving cab, very much aware of the fact that it was about 30 hours since I had last emptied my bladder. The orderly came round to the back door.

"A bottle, please."

Half-way through this performance the convoy moved off again, dragging the ambulance with it. Jesus, I was cross about that. I swore violently at the unfortunate orderly who explained sympathetically:

"We daren't get left behind, sir. We don't know the way back on our own."

On and on, into the day and the desert. On and on . . . fast and vibrating over the good patches, low-gearred and swaying through the wadis and escarpments, screaming and sliding through the soft sand. This is unending, I thought, and consoled myself with the worse agony of the long day before.

There was another halt, and this time I heard the many voices outside. The door opened and a number of men stood curious but efficiently ready to attend to me. They carried me over to a large, clean, white-painted vehicle and slid me gently off the stretcher on to a table which was all too familiar under the big light immediately overhead.

While a couple of orderlies fussed over the bandages an R.A.M.C. major came in and greeted me pleasantly. They stripped

off my gory battle-dress and other clothing and put me in clean pyjamas. I felt a lot better. The officer had a quick look at the back of my head and asked:

"Would you like a drink while we're getting things ready? It'll be a few minutes yet."

I misunderstood him completely.

"I'd like a large whisky, please."

They all laughed. The major hastened to explain that much as he would like to join me in a large whisky, it was not quite the best preparation for either of us for a rather delicate operation. What he really meant was would I like a cup of tea, or some Bovril?

I settled for a mug of tea and they propped me up to drink it. The doctor's name was Keller, and he was a little concerned about the imminent operation because, he told me, he was really a gynaecologist and although he knew a good deal about extracting babies, he had not the same amount of experience at extracting pieces of lead from skulls.

(I hope that somewhere Doctor Keller will discover from this that he is pretty good at extracting lead.)

"Have I got a piece of lead in my head?" I asked him. It was news to me.

"Can't think why you're here at all. It must be just about touching your brain as far as I can see," he added cheerfully.

I finished the tea and as I turned painfully over on to my stomach the doctor explained that I was too weak to have a general anaesthetic, he would have to operate under a local.

"It'll be a bit tender, Corporal," I heard him say. "Better shave him after the injection."

I felt the needle going into various places on the back of my scalp....

"Can you feel that, Crisp?"

"No, not a thing."

"Right. Get him cleaned up, Corporal, then we'll make a start."

A minute or two later the operation began. I never knew before that operations were such chatty occasions.

"Let's have those instruments out, Bill."

An orderly dipped into the sterilizing cabinet and pulled out a succession of bright, sharp things which he laid in a gleaming, terrifying row just in front of my face. The doctor was invisible, but a potent presence with his voice right in my ear.

"That should be enough hair off, Corporal. Clean it up a bit and then we can begin. . . . We won't need the saw, Bill, and I hope to hell the drill won't be necessary. We'll incise first with the scalpel."

My relief at the first part of this monologue, coming muffled through the gauze mask, was quickly dissipated by the sight of a razor-edged gleam passing right across my eyes. The sweat began to bead on my forehead. There was nothing to feel beyond an awareness of pressure, but the noise in my ear as metal went through skin and flesh was as deafening as opening a tight-fitting matchbox through a loudspeaker.

"That's about enough," the low, confidential monotone went on. "Now we'll just retract back the scalp a bit so that we can get at it . . . so. Hmmmm. You don't know how lucky you've been, old boy. Good thick bit of skull here. Anywhere else it would have been curtains. Came to rest in the dura. The bradawl, Bill, and then the burr. No, not that one, that's too big . . . that's the one. Now that hammer thing."

I did not see this lot going by overhead. My eyes were shut tight and little rivulets of sweat coursed over them collecting in pools in the hollows. Presently my skull boomed with a noise like the tom-toms of doom. I did not need eyes to see the chisel being tapped gently but firmly down into my brain. Some muscles in my neck and left leg started twitching.

"Can you feel that?"

"No. But I know what you're doing."

"That's all right. We needn't do any more of it. Soon be over now. The nibbling forceps, Bill."

I forced my eyes open just in time to see a horrifying instrument pass into the disembodied hand just above my face. There was a noise like a bad and prolonged gear-change. Then the voice said: "Better hold his head steady, Bill. Can't risk a jerk now. Can you feel anything, old man?"

"No," I said, a little reluctantly. The sweat stung my eyes as I tried to shut out the narrow world that pressed down on me so terrifyingly. Firm hands closed round my head and I was grateful for them. There was a quick moment of unretained pain and then the voice again. . . .

"That's got it. All over, old man. It's out. Just clean up a bit, Corporal. Dry dressing. Should plug that up with a bit of beeswax, but we have no beeswax. Here you are, old man. Show it to your

grandchildren sometime, or put it in the Cape Town museum."

I saw the smiles round the room as I opened my eyes and felt the taut muscles relaxing all along my body. The doctor held out his hand to me with a jagged piece of maroon and rust-stained lead in it, about the size of one of those large "alley" marbles.

"We'll put it in your battle-dress pocket for you," he said. "Now, if there's anything you'd like, anything you fancy, we'll try and get it for you. Except a large Scotch, which is what I'm going to have."

"There is something, as a matter of fact, Doc. . . . Have you got anything for crabs?"

There was a moment of puzzled incredulity, then they roared with laughter as I told them the story. The doctor shook his head at the end of it.

"It doesn't seem to be on the list of battle casualties. Have you tried petrol?"

"Petrol! I feel I ought to go round with a sign: No Naked Lights; No Smoking. High octane, at that."

They put me back in an ambulance that would take me on to the hospital at Tobruk early the following morning. The effect of the anaesthetic wore off in about half an hour, and now that I knew what it was and where it was the pain was worse than it had ever been before. I was grateful for the morphia that lulled me softly through the long night.

Tobruk Hospital at that time was a Florence Nightingale shambles. The first 24 hours I spent on the only available space—the hard stone floor between a couple of beds. The long ward was packed with wounded, many of them lying, like myself, on the floor waiting for vacancies. When the man in the bed above me died they carried him out, picked me up, and dumped me into blankets still warm from the warm corpse.

In the morning a couple of senior R.A.M.C. officers came round inspecting the torn flesh and shattered bones. They reached me and looked briefly under the bandages. The elder man said:

"Have him X-rayed and then get a tube in that hole to drain it." He patted me on the shoulder. "With a bit of luck we'll keep you going till you reach the Delta. There's a hospital ship sailing tomorrow for Alex."

They passed on while an orderly asked my name and number and jotted down his instructions. Straight opposite me a boy of

19 or 20, his head swathed in bandages, stared at the doctors with the dark, uncomprehending eyes of a lost dog. By the time they had reached him he was dead. They paused briefly to lift an eyelid, then the stretcher came in and the process went on as relentlessly as a car production line.

A long, recumbent queue stretched outside the X-ray room. A couple of sergeants inside went through their routine with a mechanical ruthlessness that left me cursing them with every swear word I could remember as they mauled my head about to get the right angle on the plate. I thought bitterly: "Wot-the-hell . . . general, major, private; a near-corpse has no rank, no personality, no emotions that can ever be recognized or remembered."

Back in the ward, a new lot of men lay on the floor waiting for the vacant body that would mean a vacant bed. The heavy-loaded stretchers came in and the heavy-loaded stretchers went out—carefully feet first.

At night the bombers came, heralded by wailing sirens, the sharp barking of Bofors guns and the deeper baying of heavy ack-ack. We lay and waited, shivering, for the next noise. I found my mind murmuring: "Please God, not on the ward. Please God, not on the ward." And knew that, finally, my battered nerve was broken.

A man leapt up from his bed at the far end and went down the middle of the ward cursing and shouting, his arms flailing wildly at the hostile forms that surrounded him.

Voces yelled for the orderly. A young man came in, brusque and a little bored. He took one look and ran. In a few seconds he was back with three other men. They poured all over the soldier, still fighting his wild invisible enemies. He was clamped down and fastened up, and thus they carried him out into the night.

Men muttered and groaned in the unquiet dark; from the bed alongside me a horrible rattling noise came with deadly monotony; every few minutes a match would flare in the gloom and a drawn, pain-filled face would stand out stark and hellish in a momentary incandescence. The world was full of pain and fear and hope and the oozing smell of death.

There is a long gap in my memory after the nightmare of Tobruk. Morphia clouded my days and brought peace to my nights. I remember the quayside in the glad sun and the fresh, sea-rippled breeze. Then days and nights of movement, ships and trains,

ambulances, stretchers, red crosses and the broad, battle-dressed backs of the bearers looming eternally above my feet—each one identical, each one a different man, impersonal, a part of the wood and fibre of the stretcher. . . . The base hospital between Fayid and Geneifa on the edge of the Great Bitter Lake in which the narrow waters of the Suez Canal lose for a little while their close confinement. There were women there, women dressed as nurses, un-touchable and almost intangible, their minds on the vigorous, healthy young Fleet Air Arm pilots nearby . . . noisy convalescents in the next ward whom I shouted at viciously when their rowdiness came to me on sound-waves that jarred my skull . . . the big male-nurse who finally produced the blue ointment that rid me of those pyjama souvenirs. . . . Professor Smith, the Edinburgh specialist, who could not quite comprehend my complaint that my big toe was hurting me. Possibly he thought it had something to do with a curious corner of my brain that had gone amiss.

I owe my life to the surgical skill of Professor Smith, but so far as I was concerned he was an uncertain psychologist. When I am ill I like to be left alone; I don't want to see anybody. He came in one day and gave me a hell of a choking off for not trying to live. "You've got to fight it," he told me roughly. "Show some guts. You're giving in to it. We can't keep you alive if you're not going to help us."

Nothing was farther from my mind than dying. It never entered my head. I knew he was only trying to prod me out of a moroseness that he mistook for surrender, but it annoyed me. I glared back at him.

"Oh, for Christ's sake shut up and leave me alone."

As the infection spread under my scalp, jabbing spearpoints pierced and released what seemed to be the quintessence of pain so that I would give sudden, unpremeditated yells. One day, with my temperature soaring and my head a flaming inferno, the professor came in to tell me that the mastoid was badly infected and would need an immediate operation.

They wheeled me into the operating theatre the same night. Just before the anæsthetic mask was slipped over my face, the theatre sister came to the head of the operating table with a notebook and pencil in her hand. She bent down close to my mouth.

"You'd better give me," she said in a low voice full of compassion, "the name and address of your next of kin."

THAT MARK HORSE

Jack Schaefer



THAT MARK HORSE

NOT that horse, mister. Not that big slab-sided brute. Take any or all of the rest, I'm selling the whole string. But not that one. By rights I should. He's no damn good to me. The best horse either one of us'll likely ever see and he's no damn good to me. Or me to him. But I'll not sell him. . . .

Try something, mister. Speak to him. The name's Mark. . . . There. See how his ears came up? See how he swung to check you and what you were doing? The way any horse would. Any horse that likes living and knows his name. But did you notice how he wouldn't look at me? Used to perk those ears and swing that head whenever he heard my voice. Not any more. Knows I'm talking about him right now and won't look at me. Almost ten months it is and he still won't look at me. . . .

That horse and I were five-six years younger when this all began. I was working at one of the early dude ranches and filling in at the rodeos roundabout. A little riding, a little roping. Not too good, just enough to place once in a while. I was in town one day for the mail and the postmaster poked his head out to chuckle some and say there was something for me at the station a mite too big for the box. I went down and the agent wasn't there. I scouted around and he was out by the stock corral and a bunch of other men too all leaning on the fence and looking over. I pushed up by the agent and there was that horse inside. He was alone in there and he was the damndest horse I'd ever seen. Like the rest around I'd been raised on cow ponies and this thing looked big as the side of a barn to me and awkward as all hell. He'd just been let down the chute from a box car on the siding. There were bits of straw clinging to him and he stood still with head up testing the air. For that first moment he looked like a kid's crazy drawing of a horse, oversize and exaggerated with legs too long and big stretched-out barrel and high-humped withers and long-reaching neck. The men were joshing and wondering was it an elephant or a giraffe and I was agreeing and then I saw that horse move. He

took a few steps walking and flowed forward into a trot. That's the only way to put it. He flowed forward the way water rolls down a hill. His muscles didn't bunch and jump under his hide. They slid easy and smooth and those long legs reached for distance without seeming to try. He made a double circuit of the corral without slowing, checking everything as he went by. He wasn't trying to find a way out. He just wanted to move some and see where he was and what was doing roundabout. He saw us along the fence and we could have been posts for all the particular attention he paid us. He stopped by the far fence and stood looking over it and now I'd seen him move there wasn't anything awkward about him. He was big and he was rough-built but he wasn't awkward any more even standing there still. Nobody was saying a word. Everyone there knew horses and they'd seen what I saw. "Damn it to eternal hell," I said. "That's a horse." The agent turned and saw who it was. "Glad you think so," he said. "It's your horse. This came along too." And he stuck a note in my hand.

It had my name on it all right. It was from a New York State man who ran some sort of factory there, made shoes I think he told me once. He'd been a regular at the ranch, not for any dude doings but once a summer for a camping trip and I'd been assigned to him several years running. It wasn't long. It said the doctors had been carving him some and told him he couldn't ride again so he was closing his stable. He'd sold his other stock but thought this horse Mark ought to be out where there was more room than there was back east. Wanted me to take him and treat him right.

I shoved that note in a pocket and eased through the fence. "Mark," I called and across the corral those ears perked stiff and that big head swung my way. "Mark," I called again and that horse turned and came about halfway and stood with head high, looking me over. I picked a coil of rope off a post and shook out a loop and he watched me with ears forward and head a bit to one side. I eased close and suddenly I snaked up the loop and it was open right for his head and he just wasn't there. He was thirty feet to the left and I'd have sworn he made it in one leap. Maybe a dozen times I tried and I didn't have a chance. The comments coming from the fence line weren't improving my temper any. Then I noticed he wasn't watching me, he was watching the rope, and I had an attack of common sense. He was wearing a halter. This wasn't any western range horse. This was one of those big eastern crossbreds with a lot of thoroughbred in them I'd heard about.

Likely he'd never had a rope thrown at him before. I tossed the rope over by the fence and walked toward him and he stood blowing his nostrils a bit and looking at me. I stopped a few feet away and didn't even try to reach for the halter. He looked at me and he was really seeing me the way a horse can and I was somebody who knew his name out here where he'd been dumped out of the darkness of a boxcar. He stretched that long neck and sniffed at my shirt and I took hold of the halter and that was all there was to it. . . .

That was the beginning of my education. Yes, mister, it was me had to be taught, not that horse. The next lesson came the first time I tried to ride him. I was thinking what a big brute he was and what a lot of power was penned in him and I'd have to control all that so I used a Spanish spade bit that would be wicked if used rough. He didn't want to take it and I had to force it on him. The same with the saddle. I used a double-rig with a high-roll cantle and he snorted at it and kept sidling away and grunted all the time I was tightening the cinches. He stood steady enough when I swung aboard but when we started off nothing felt right. The saddle was too small for him and sat too high-arched over the backbone and those sloping withers. He kept wanting to drop his head and rub his mouth on his legs over that bit. At last he sort of sighed and eased out and went along without much fuss. He'd decided I was plain stupid on some things and he'd endure and play along for a while. At the time I thought he was accepting me as boss so I started him really stepping and the instant he understood I wanted him to move that was what he did. He moved. He went from a walk into a gallop in a single flowing rush and it was only that high cantle kept me from staying behind. I'm telling you, mister, that was something, the feel of those big muscles sliding smooth under me and distance dropping away under those hooves.

Then I realized he wasn't even working. I was travelling faster than I ever had on horseback and he was just loafing along without a sign of straining for speed. That horse just liked moving. I never knew another liked it as much. It could get to him the way liquor can a man and he'd keep reaching for more. That's what he was doing then. I could feel him notching it up the way an engine does when the engineer pushes forward on the throttle and I began to wonder how he'd be on stopping. I had an idea twelve hundred pounds of power moving like that would be a lot different from eight hundred pounds of bumpy little cow pony. I

was right. I pulled in some and he slowed some but not much and I pulled harder and he tossed his head at the bit, biting, and I yanked in sharp and he stopped. Yes, mister, he stopped all right. But he didn't slap down on his haunches and slide to a stop on his rump the way a cow pony does. He took a series of jumps stiff-legged to brake and stopped short and sudden with his legs planted like trees and I went forward, bumping my belly on the horn and over his head and hanging there doubled down over his ears with my legs clamped around his neck. That Mark horse was surprised as I was but he took care of me. He kept his head up and stood steady as a rock while I climbed down his neck to the saddle. I was feeling foolish and mad at myself and him and I yanked mean on the reins and swung him hard to head for home and that did it. He'd had enough. He shucked me off his back the way someone might toss a beanbag. Don't ask me how. I'd ridden plenty horses and could make a fair showing even on the tough ones. But that Mark horse wanted me off so he put me off. And then he didn't bolt for the horizon. He stopped about twenty feet away and stood there watching me.

I sat on the ground and looked at him. I'd been stupid but I was beginning to learn. I remembered the feel of him under me, taking me with him not trying to get away from me. I remembered how he'd behaved all along and I studied on all that. There wasn't a trace of meanness in that horse. He didn't mind being handled and ridden. He'd been ready and willing for me to come up and take him in the station corral. But he wasn't going to have a rope slapped at him and be yanked around. He was ready and willing to let me ride him and to show me how a real horse could travel. But he wasn't going to do much of it with a punishing bit and a rig he didn't like. He was a big batch of damned good horse-flesh and he knew that and was proud of it and he had a hell of a lot of self-respect. He just plain wouldn't be pushed around and that was that and I had to understand it. I claim it proud for myself that I did. I went to him and he waited for me as I knew now he would. I swung easy as I could up into the saddle and he stood steady with his head turned a little so he could watch me. I let the lines stay loose and guided him just by neck-reining and I walked him back to the ranch. I slid down there and took off the western saddle and the bridle with that spade bit. I hunted through the barn till I found a light snaffle bit and cleaned it and put it in the bridle. I held it up for him to see and he took it with no fuss at all.

I routed out the biggest of the three English saddles we had for eastern dudes who wouldn't use anything else and that I'd always thought were damned silly things. I showed it to him and he stood quiet while I slapped it on and buckled the single leather cinch. "Mark," I said, "I don't know how to sit one of these crazy postage stamps and I'm bunged up some from that beating. Let's take it easy." Mister, that horse knew what I'd said. He gave me the finest ride I ever had. . . .

See what I mean, the best damn horse either of us'll ever see? No, I guess you can't. Not complete. You'd have to live with him day after day and have the endless little things happening tally up in your mind. After a while you'd understand as I did what a combination he was of a serious dependable gent and a mischievous little kid. With a neat sense of timing on those things too. Take him out for serious riding and he'd tend strict to his business, which was covering any kind of ground for you at any kind of speed you wanted. The roughest going made no difference to him. He was built to go at any clip just about anywhere short of straight up a cliff, and you'd get the feeling he'd try that if you really wanted him to. But let him loaf around with nothing to do and he'd be curious as a cat on the prowl, poking into every corner he could find and seeing what devilment he could do. Nothing mean, just playful. Maybe a nuisance if you were doing a job where he could get at you and push his big carcass in the way whiffling at everything or come up quiet behind and blow sudden down your shirt collar. Let him get hold of a bucket and you'd be buying a new one. There'd not be much left of the old one after he'd had his fun. He'd stick his nose in and flip the thing and do that over and over like he was trying for a distance record then start whamming it around with his hoofs, tickled silly at the racket. And when there'd be no one else around to see how crazy you were acting he'd get you to playing games too. He liked to have you sneak off and hide and whistle low for him and he'd pad around stretching that long neck into the damndest places looking for you and blow triumphant when he found you. Yes, mister, that horse liked living and being around him'd help you do the same.

And work? That horse was a working fool. No. There was nothing foolish about it. The ranch was still in the beef business too in those days and he'd never had any experience with cattle

before. He was way behind our knowing little cow ponies when it came to handling them and he knew it. So he tried to balance that by using those brains of his overtime and working harder than any of the others. He'd watch them and try to figure what they were doing and how they did it and then do it himself. He'd try so hard sometimes I'd ache inside, feeling that eagerness quivering under me. Of course he never could catch up to them on some things. Too big. Too eager. Needed too much room moving around. He couldn't slide into a tight bunch of cattle and cut out the right one, easing it out without disturbing the rest much. And he wasn't much good for roping even though he did let me use a western saddle for that soon as he saw the sense to it. Lunged too hard when I'd looped an animal and was ready to throw it. Maybe he'd have learned the right touch in time but he didn't get the chance. The foreman saw us damn near break a steer's neck and told us to quit. But on straight herding he couldn't be beat. He could head a runaway steer before it even stretched its legs. He could scour the brush for strays like a hound dog on a scent. He could step out and cover territory all day at a pace that'd kill off most horses and come in seeming damn near as fresh as when he started. I used to think I was tough and could take long hours but that horse could ride me right out of the saddle and act like he thought I was soft for calling a halt.

But I still haven't hit the real thing. That horse was just plain honest all through. No, that's not the exact word. Plenty of horses are that. He was something a bit more. Square. That's it. He was just plain square in everything he did and the way he looked at living. He liked to have things fair and even. He was my horse and he knew it. I claim it proud that for a time anyway he really was my horse and let me know it. But that meant too I was his man and I had my responsibilities. I wasn't a boss giving orders. I was his partner. He wasn't something I owned doing what I made him do. He was my partner doing his job because he wanted to and because he knew that was the way it ought to be with a man and a horse. A horse like him. Long as I treated him right he'd treat me right. If I'd get mean or stupid with him I'd be having trouble. I'd be taking another lesson. Like the time along about the second or third week when I was feeling safer on that English saddle and forgot he wasn't a hard-broke cow pony. I wanted a sudden burst of speed for one reason or another and I hit him with my spurs. I was so used to doing that with the other

horses that I couldn't figure at first what had happened. I sat on the ground rubbing the side I'd lit on and stared at him watching me about twenty feet away. Then I had it. I unfastened those spurs and threw them away. I've never used the things again ever, any time on any horse....

Well, mister, there I was mighty proud to have a horse like that but still some stupid because I hadn't tumbled to what you might call his speciality. He had to show me. It was during fall round-up. We had a bunch of steers in the home corral being culled for market and something spooked them and they started milling wild and pocketed me and Mark in a corner. They were slamming into the fence rails close on each side. I knew we'd have to do some fancy stepping to break through and get around them. I must have felt nervous on the reins because that Mark horse took charge himself. He swung away from those steers and leaped straight at the near fence and sailed over it. He swung in a short circle and stopped looking back at those steers jamming into the corner where we'd been and I sat the saddle catching the breath he'd jolted out of me. I should have known. He was a jumper. He was what people back east called a hunter. Maybe he'd been a timber horse, a steeplechaser. He'd cleared that four-foot fence with just about no take-off space like a kid skipping at hopscotch. I'm telling you, mister, I had me a time the next days jumping him over everything in sight. When I was sure of my seat I made him show me what he really could do and he played along with me for anything within reason, even stretching that reason considerable. The day I had nerve enough and he took me smack over an empty wagon I really began to strut. But there was one thing he wouldn't do. He wouldn't keep jumping the same thing over and over the same time out. Didn't see any sense in that. He'd clear whatever it was maybe twice, maybe three times, and if I tried to put him at it again he'd stop cold and swing his head to look at me and I'd shrivel down to size and feel ashamed....

So I had something new in these parts then, a jumping horse bred to it and built for it with the big frame to take the jolts and the power to do it right. I had me a horse could bring me some real money at the rodeos. I wouldn't have to try for prize money. I could put on exhibition stunts. I got together with some of the old show hands and we worked up an act that pleased the crowd.

They'd lead Mark out so the people could see the size of him and he'd plunge around at the end of the shank, rolling his eyes and tossing his head. He'd paw at the sky and lash out behind like he was the worst mean-tempered mankiller ever caught. It was all a joke because he was the safest horse any man ever handled and anyone who watched close could see those hoofs never came near connecting with anything except air. But he knew what it was all about and he made it look good. The wranglers would get him over and into the outlaw chute with him pretending to fight all the way. They'd move around careful outside and reach through the bars to bridle and saddle him like they were scared green of him. I'd climb to the top rails and ease down on the saddle like I was scared too but determined to break my neck trying to ride one hell of a bucking brute. We'd burst out of the chute like a cannon going off and streak for the high fence on the opposite side of the arena. All the people who'd not seen it before would come up gasping on their seats expecting a collision that would shake the whole place. And at the last second that horse Mark would rise up and over the fence in a clean, sweet jump, and I'd be standing in the stirrups waving my hat and yelling and the crowd'd go wild.

After a time most people knew what to expect and the surprise part of that act was gone so we had to drop it. But we worked up another that got the crowds no matter how many times they saw it. I never liked it much but I blew too hard once how that horse would jump anything and someone suggested this and I was hot and said sure he'd do it and I was stuck with it. He never liked it much either but he did it for me. Maybe he knew I was getting expensive habits and needed the money coming in. Well, anyway, we did it and it took a lot of careful practice with a slow old steer before we tried the real thing. I'd be loafing around on Mark in the arena while the bull riding was on. I'd watch and pick a time when one of the bulls had thrown his rider and was hopping around in the clear or making a dash across the open. I'd nudge Mark with my heels and he'd be off in that forward flowing with full power in it. We'd streak for the bull angling in at the side and the last sliced second before a head-on smash we'd lift and go over in a clean sweep and swing to come up by the grandstand and take the applause.

Thinking of that since I've been plenty shamed. I've a notion the reason people kept wanting to see it wasn't just to watch a damned good horse do a damned difficult job. They were always

hoping something would happen. Always a chance the bull might swerve and throw us off stride and make it a real smash. Always a chance the horns might toss too high and we'd tangle with them and come down in a messy scramble. But I didn't think about that then or how I was asking more than a man should expect in a tight spot that can't be avoided from a horse that's always played square with him. I was thinking of the money and the cheers and the pats on the back. And then it happened. . . .

Not what maybe you're thinking, mister. Not that at all. That horse never failed in a jump and never would. We'd done our stint on the day, done it neat and clean, gone over a big head-tossing bull with space to spare and were just about ready to take the exit gate without bothering to open it. Another bull was in the arena, a mean, tricky one that'd just thrown his rider after a tussle and was scattering dust real mad. The two tenders on their cagey little cow ponies had cut in to let the rider scramble to safety and were trying to hustle the bull into the closing out pen. They thought they had him going in and were starting to relax in their saddles when that brute broke away and tore out into the open again looking for someone on foot to take apart. While the tenders were still wheeling to go after him he saw something over by the side fence and headed toward it fast. I saw too and sudden I was cold all over. Some damn fool woman had let a little boy get away from her, maybe three-four years old, too young to have sense, and that kid had crawled through the rails and was twenty-some feet out in the arena. I heard people screaming at him and saw him standing there confused and the bull moving and the tenders too far away. I slammed my heels into Mark and we were moving too the way only that horse could move. I had to lunge forward along his neck or he'd have been right out from under me. There wasn't time to head the bull or try to pick up the kid. There wasn't time for anything fancy at all. There was only one thing could be done. We swept in angling straight to the big moving target of that bull and I slammed down on the reins with all my strength so Mark couldn't get his head up to jump and go over, and in the last split second all I could think of was my leg maybe getting caught between when they hit and I dived off Mark sidewise into the dust and he drove on alone and smashed into that bull just back of the big sweeping horns.

They picked me up half dazed with an aching head and assorted bruises and put me on some straw bales in the stable till a doctor

could look me over. They led Mark into one of the stalls with a big gash from one of the horns along his side and a swelling shoulder so painful he dragged the leg without trying to step on it. They put ropes on the bull where he lay quiet with the fight knocked out of him and prodded him up and led him off. I never did know just what happened to the kid except that he was safe enough. I didn't care because when I pushed up off those bales without waiting for the doctor and went into the stall that Mark horse wouldn't look at me....

So that's it, mister. That's what happened. But I won't have you getting any wrong notions about it. I won't have you telling me the way some people do that horse is through with me because I made him smash into that bull. Nothing like that at all. He doesn't blame me for the pulled tendon in his shoulder that'll bother him long as he lives when the weather's bad. Not that horse. I've thought the whole business over again and again. I can remember every last detail of those hurrying seconds in the arena, things I wasn't even aware of at the time itself. That horse was flowing forward before I slammed my heels into him. There wasn't any attempt at lifting that big head or any gathering of those big muscles under me for a jump when I was slamming down on the reins. He'd seen. He knew. He knew what had to be done. That horse is through with me because at the last second I went yellow and I let him do it alone. He thinks I didn't measure up in the partnership. I pulled out and let him do it alone.

He'll let me ride him even now but I've quit that because it isn't the same. Even when he's really moving and the weather's warm and the shoulder feels good and he's reaching for distance and notching it up in the straight joy of eating the wind he's doing that alone too. I'm just something he carries on his back and he won't look at me....

THE BIG STILL

Roderick Wilkinson



*"The Big Still" is published by
John Long, Ltd.*

The Author

Roderick Wilkinson, born in Glasgow and educated at the North Kelvinside Secondary School, is now manager of one of the largest advertising agencies in Scotland. He still lives in Glasgow, is married with two children. He began writing when he was sixteen and has been writing ever since, mostly in the evenings, and has been particularly successful in the medium of radio and television—thirty plays and documentaries produced over the networks of more than twenty countries. *The Big Still* is his second novel. Among his special interests are angling and playing the trumpet.

CHAPTER ONE

I LEANED over the little bridge and broke my image in the water with a pebble. He settled his elbows alongside mine on the stonework.

"You enjoying it, Mr. Daly?"

I leaned my weight on one arm. "Mr. Anderson, I thought places like this had all sold out to the coach parties."

He opened his cigarette-case. "We didn't. They've been hunting for us for years but they'll never find us now." He nodded over to an old iron cannon at the terrace steps. "That's loaded. First bus that drives in here gets the lot."

I lit both our cigarettes. "You been here long?"

"Three years. Came up here from Peeblesshire. That was the first hotel we bought. We had our trial run there."

I took off my hat and let the breeze fan my warm head. "You've certainly got it all."

He sighed. "Yes, I think we have, Mr. Daly. Same people come back every summer. Wonderful for the kids—five minutes to the biggest, loneliest, loveliest beach in Scotland, couple of boats on the river here, tennis, swimming-pool, golf course a mile up the hill, dancing at night, bar, h. and c., four meals a day. What more d'you want?"

"A drink."

He raised himself. "That's a damn good idea."

We walked through the sunshine-and-shadow chessboard of the trees and over the long lawn.

I said nothing for a while. Then, "You get many people here in the late autumn?"

"Ye-es. Quite a lot. Anglers mostly. They come up for the salmon on the Rissen. We have this stretch right up for a mile. You ever fish, Mr. Daly?"

"No. But I'm thinking of it. You got a rod here?"

"Plenty. Take your pick—trout, salmon, spinner."

A gleaming black limousine was allowing its tyres to make a quiet crunching noise on the gravel driveway. As we walked up

the terrace steps, it stopped in front of the hotel and a uniformed chauffeur got out to open the passenger door.

Anderson jerked to action. "I'll join you later in the drink. That's Henry Callingway." He dashed up to welcome him.

A tall, broad man got out of the car. He was dressed in blue blazer and fawn slacks; his iron-grey hair did its best above the thick neck. I stood aside to let the procession pass—porter with cases, chauffeur with coats, then a cheroot with Callingway behind its smell. I reckoned I didn't like Callingway—which shows you how right you can be about people.

I went into the cocktail bar. Mrs. Emmett was bulging over one stool even at this hour of the evening; there was a young couple in the corner beside the open french window; a man like a retired cattle farmer sat on another stool and kept calling on his Skye terrier to "Siddown will ye!"

I climbed up and called for a large Scotch. Then Anderson came in. "Make it two," I said.

"That's that," Anderson said. "Got him settled in."

Mrs. Emmett said, "Is it right that Mr. Callingway's here, Mr. Anderson?"

"Quite right, Mrs. Emmett. Just arrived."

The young man in the corner called, "*Henry Callingway?*"

"That's right."

I lifted my glass. "Mr. Callingway."

Anderson drained his.

I said, "Who is he?"

The bartender looked at me pityingly. Anderson obviously thought I was kidding—he lifted one eyebrow. Mrs. Emmett put a plump hand on the bar counter and looked skywards. "Well!"

The bartender thought he would be nice and tight about his information. "Mr. Callingway is a very important business man. He comes up here quite often to relax."

"That sounds like a scoop. You should sell it to one of the dailies," I said.

Anderson tried to laugh. The bartender scowled.

Mrs. Emmett said: "Well, I thought *everyone* knew Mr. Callingway. Of course—you're American. Maybe that's it."

"Yes," I said. "Maybe that's it."

Anderson called for two more drinks and became quietly chatty in trying to change the subject. "You're American, Mr. Daly, are you? Well, well."

"Canadian," I said. "Down the hatch."

"Yes—cheerio," he smacked his lips. "Canadian, eh. Well, well. They get more the same thing every day." He laughed.

There was a silence while Anderson waited on me telling him what my job was, where I lived, whether I was married, what I was doing in Scotland, and what I thought of whisky. While he waited the door opened and the room was suddenly filled with Callingway. The barman jumped to attention. Anderson switched on his biggest smile. Mrs. Emmett beamed, and the young couple in the corner scraped chairs noisily and turned round to see him.

Anderson said: "Well, Mr. Callingway—everything all right? Settled in, eh?"

The voice from behind the cheroot was big, rumbley, incoherently English and sounded between puffs like "first-class" and "how's-the-fishing?" and "got-a-match, Anderson?" Then everyone seeming to be talking at once—to, for and at Mr. Callingway.

He stood beside the counter, one hand in his pocket, looking round the little rose-coloured bar. Anderson's smile seemed fixed; Mrs. Emmett fingered her beads and smirked.

She said, "Are you staying long, Mr. Callingway?"

"'Bout three days, I should say. Mh. Nice whisky, Anderson. Let's have another, eh? Good idea. Got the place done up, I see. Any shooting going on? Old George doing anything? Getting lazy. Place is hoaching with duck. Saw them on the way down. Plenty of them. Early this year. Tonight? Has he, b' George. Never said a word. Blighter. Might have said, damn 'm."

The house phone buzzed. The bartender answered it, laid up the receiver and said:

"Call for Mr. Daly in the hall."

I went out to the telephone kiosk at the doorway and lifted the receiver. A voice said:

"That you, Daly?"

"Yes."

"This is Henderson of United Shipping. You been briefed yet?"

"No."

"How long've you been there?"

"Since Friday."

"And nobody's met you?"

"That's right."

There was a short silence. Then he said: "I can't understand it.

They know where you are." The voice became brighter. "How's the weather?"

"Like Hawaii. How's London?"

"Raining. You finding plenty to amuse you?"

"I will. A visiting comic's just come in."

He thought that was funny. "Stay around. Phone me tomorrow night if nobody turns up."

"Okay."

I hung up.

I went outside. A dark blue coupé was sliding among the other cars. The door opened. She was dressed in a blue silk suit and her sleek black hair gleamed in the sun. A fair, thick-set man got out of the driver's seat, slammed the car door loudly and followed the woman into the hotel. She looked beautiful, but vaguely bitchy. He looked angry about something. They passed me in silence. I thought that—bitchy or not—it must be *his* fault.

I stayed at the doorway for a while. I wanted another drink but I felt that that bar wasn't big enough to take both my whisky and Callingway's voice. It was five o'clock. Across the lawn a woman with two children was walking tiredly, carrying toy spades, pails, magazines. The children were jumping ahead of her, their gay-coloured clothes flashing in the evening sunlight. A wood-pigeon was making pleasant sounds over by the trees.

Now I know three Scotlands—the rain-sodden kind they told me about in London, the slummy, clanging, hard-hitting kind I found for myself in Glasgow, and now this kind. Henderson could have sent me to a better place, but I couldn't think where. I had been in this brown-and-gold quiet for three days.

I thought about Henderson. It was just a week ago since he telephoned me at my office in London and asked me to go and see him. When I called he told me that the Farraday Investigation Agency had recommended me and was I free to take on a job? I asked him what kind of job, but he wouldn't say. All I had to do meantime was get to Scotland, go to the Gordon Hotel at Mellion Bay and stay there. Stay there? Yes—till somebody came along and briefed me.

Now I was here, standing in a sunlit doorway doing nothing but looking across the lawn—at twenty pounds a day plus expenses. I hoped Henderson's job was worth it. I have a conscience.

Anderson came out of the doorway.

"Warm, eh? For this time of year."

I said: "I can take it. They didn't tell me Scotland was like this."

"This is the time to see it. You did the right thing."

The fair, thick-set man came out and said to Anderson: "Mr. Anderson—we're staying tonight. That okay with you?"

Anderson replied, "Yes—that's all right, Mr. Kelso." He led the way into the hotel. "If you'll sign the register . . ." They disappeared into the shadow of the entrance.

We had dinner. I had mine alone at a small table by the window.

The woman I had seen with the two children earlier was now joined by her husband. She looked as if getting the kids to bed had been an ordeal. She sighed wearily and laughed.

The fair, thick-set man seemed now to be on better terms with his wife. I didn't like his smile, but it was a smile. She looked attractively cat-smooth, her blue-black hair gleaming. I saw the waiter bring champagne in an ice-bucket. He poured it and they drank a toast. He lifted his glass, touched hers then slowly raised it to his lips. The Latin touch seemed odd for a man of his thick, loose features. I thought that whatever was the toast, I didn't believe that acknowledging smile of hers. It curved along one side. Looking at him, I couldn't blame her.

Callingway, of course, came in late. His table was graced with Mrs. Emmett, and a red-faced, white-haired man who looked tipsy. I noticed as he entered that Callingway glanced over at the fair, thick-set man, paused for a second, then nodded curtly.

I had reached the dessert when Anderson opened the door of the dining-room and said: "If there's anybody interested—the salmon are running tonight. There are two of them jumping up in the pool." He waited, looked at the young couple in the corner, at me, at Callingway's party, at the thick man.

Callingway said in a loud voice: "You kin keep the salmon, Anderson. What about the duck?"

Anderson, one hand on the door, forced a laugh. "You'd better see Sir George about *that*, Mr. Callingway." He coughed, smiled servilely. Callingway made some joke I couldn't hear, belched, then laughed loudly.

The fair man was talking to his wife. I heard her say, "Okay with me," then he turned to beckon Anderson. He said, "What about the spinner?"

Anderson said: "Not much good, Mr. Kelso. Too many reeds on

the banks. You can't get a decent cast. Should be all right with the fly, though."

"Okay. Will you loan me a rod?"

"Yes, I'll set it up for you. Sorry I can't get a gillie."

"I won't need one. I'll drift it myself. I'm only going up for an hour."

Anderson went out.

I went down to the bridge after dinner. It was a rose-and-lilac evening with a velvet feel in the air. The wood-pigeons were silent now and one lone bird's sunset song twitfered across the lawns in beautiful isolation. I stopped and leaned on the stone parapet and looked upstream along the still mirror of water. The trees and bushes were reflected in a faithful replica of their purple silhouettes against the dying sun. I heard the soft creak of oars and the gentle lap of water swirling in a regular, leisurely beat. Upstream—just where the river widened at the bend—a small boat was disappearing round the turn. A fishing-rod stuck out from the stern. I remembered seeing something almost as beautiful somewhere—Italy maybe—but I couldn't think exactly where. A small fish burst the smooth surface for a fly and flopped on the surface heavily; the widening ripples slowly faded out to the banks. A late bee hummed somewhere nearby. In the distance I heard the report of a duck-shooter's gun.

Ten minutes passed. It could have been ten hours.

I could think of only one thing that could possibly uglify my quiet smoke by that bridge—and I got him. In the flash of sunset orange by the trees, I saw Henry Callingway walk towards the bridge and through the splash of the lengthening shadows.

He came over to me and leaned on the stone by my elbow. He was breathing quickly, as if from the exertion of the walk.

"Your name's Daly, isn't it?"

I let my cigarette-smoke drift and let my eyes stay on the river. "That's right."

"Don't be so bloody belligerent. I'm here to brief you on the job."

I raised myself. "That," I said, "is very much different, Mr. Callingway." It was then I noticed that his shoes were a little mud-stained.

He dabbed his flushed face with a white handkerchief. "Daly, isn't it? Right. Now, listen, Daly. I asked Henderson to get you up here because I've a lot of business to do in Scotland this week—especially in Aberdeen—and I thought this place would be as

good as any to have a quiet chat. Engaging a—who-d'you-call-em?—private eye—isn't the sort of thing we want to get around. That's the reason for the cloak-and-dagger touch. Nothing exciting—just that we don't want anybody to know what we're up to." He breathed. "Now, listen Daly—what're your charges, by the way?"

I told him.

"Mh. Well—look, Daly. I'll double it if you can do what we want."

"And what do you want, Mr. Callingway?"

"We want to stop people pinching our whisky."

I said nothing.

"Maybe I should've said," he breathed, "I'm director in fifteen companies. Got interests all over the place. Director of United Shipping, frinstance. I've got big interests in the S.W.P.—that's a big Scotch whisky merger—and they've appointed me to handle this damn stealing that's going on."

"You've been to the police, I suppose."

He laughed. "The police? They've been on the case for nearly two years. They know it all. But no arrests. Evidence, but no proof. Plenty of energy and brains there—but they can't stop it."

"What police are working on it?"

"Glasgow C.I.D. Chap called Rae's been in charge of the thing since the beginning. I saw him on Monday and told 'm straight—we want some *action* on this damn thing. We want some arrests. Insurance people are playing hell."

I smiled. "Mr. Rae would love that."

Callingway shrugged. "Anyway, I told him the day for anything else but plain speaking was over."

A thought struck me. "Did you tell Rae where you were?"

"I told him I'd be here—in case he wanted me."

"Did you tell him about me?"

"No, no. You're—we've engaged you on our own. Quite frankly, I don't think the police have the faintest idea where to begin."

"How is the whisky being stolen?"

"That, friend Daly, is why we've engaged you."

"You don't know?"

He shrugged. "We know certain things."

There was another duck-gun explosion up the river.

"Damn ducks. Wish I was up there. They're early at it. Where was I? Yes. Y'see, Scotch whisky, Daly, is made up mainly from two kinds of spirit—the malt whisky and the grain whisky. It's when

the different kinds are blended you get your drop of the real Mackie—and it's this blending that makes up nearly all of the popular kinds you buy. Now—the whisky comes from the distillery—in casks. It goes to the bonding warehouse—that's under control of the Revenue people—and it lies there till it's mature and ready for selling. Then the whisky blenders take it out of bond, pay the revenue duty and bottle it. And this thieving is going on between the distillery and the bonding warehouse."

"How? On the railroad?"

"No—it travels by trucks. The railway strikes we've been having over the past couple of years make road transport a safer bet—at least so we thought."

"Why don't you send it by rail then?"

"We did last year—and more of *that* load was pinched from a goods yard. Now we're back to trucks."

I heard the light sound of footsteps and turned round. Mrs. Kelso was sauntering towards us, smoking a cigarette, her lime-coloured coat lightly held over her shoulders. As she passed behind us she smiled, "Good evening."

I raised my hat. Callingway rumbled something. She passed by into the velvet mist.

There was silence for a while before Callingway said: "Damn good-lookin' woman. That fellow's wife."

"What fellow? Kelso? That his name?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

"I saw you nod to him in the dining-room. I thought you knew him."

"I've met'm somewhere—damned if I know where. Know his face—that's why I nodded to'm. Blasted good-looking woman that wife of his, though. Must be off for a walk." He paused. "Where was I?"

"You send them by trucks now."

"That's right—we're back to lorries."

I lit another cigarette. "How many steals have you had?"

"Three."

"Three? That doesn't sound a back-breaker to me."

"Doesn't it?" He breathed. "Listen, Daly. Every one of these thefts was a truckload—twelve casks of distilled spirit. In money that means about twenty thousand pounds."

I took off my hat and leaned on the parapet again. "That," I said, "is money."

"You see it now? This committee of mine is pretty rich. It's not all *that* rich."

"You've got trouble."

"It's a gang—we're sure of it. But here's the *real* worry. The stuff's not on sale."

I had to think about that one. "Not on sale? Where's it going?"

He smiled crookedly. "You tell us. Where's it going?"

"Underground?"

He shook his head. "Revenue people would have smelled it out months ago. You can't buy it in *any* colour of market. It just disappears."

"They getting it out of the country, you think?"

"Not a hope. You obviously don't know the British Customs and Excise blokes."

I shrugged. "I know racketeers. They know a few tricks—most of them."

"In two years something would have shown. Not a hope."

I sighed. "One thing you *can* be sure of—they're not putting it down drains."

He laughed thickly. "If they were—even *that* would've been discovered by now. The damn stuff just disappears, I tell you."

"What about its maturing? If they *are* selling it—and you can't tell me they're *not*—would it be matured?"

"How the hell could it be? They pinch it before it gets to the bonding warehouse. Some of it may be partly matured. None of it can be fully matured."

I hunched my shoulders and let my weight lean on my elbows. "That's nice. If they *are* selling it somewhere—it means you've got something else besides a whisky-stealing racket."

He sighed. "Yes, we've got something else all right. They may be completing the maturing of the whisky in hours."

"Can it be done?"

He shrugged. "There *are* ways—blowing air through it gives it an impression of maturity, frinstance. All the old distillers know these tricks. Silver nitrate particles is another—Germans tried that quite successfully a few years back. But there's never been a really reliable method that could be used on a big scale."

I accepted one of his cigarettes. "There may be now."

He puffed at his cigarette in agitation. His voice was low. "Now, listen, Daly—I want you to get to the bottom of this. They tell me you're the best man there is for a job like this. And I want results.

The insurance people are jumping our premiums sky-high. They're raising hell and want to know what we are doing about it. The police don't know how it's happening. *We* don't know. But *you've* got to get to know, Daly. And I'm just as much interested in the maturing as I am in the stealing. Get the facts. You'll see we won't be stingy about a bonus. There's more at stake here than these lorryloads of whisky. This early maturing has every one of us shaking in our shoes. You see what it can mean, don't you?"

"Yes, I see that. The stocks you've laid down in bond could die on you in the market."

"That's it. And whisky's the number one export in this country just now. If this racket isn't stopped—" He shrugged. "Anyway, I'm only concerned with our own interests meanwhile."

He leaned on the parapet beside me. We smoked in silence.

The bend of the river was quite bright in the reflected orange of the sunset. The tall reeds stood silhouetted in a dull purple. I saw the little rowing-boat glide idly in the water—slowly and silently towards the bridge. It reached the far bank stern first, turned round gracefully and drifted silently on that orange-blazed water nearest to us. Then it turned again and slid quietly downstream very, very slowly. The boat was almost below us before I saw the hand that trailed loosely in the water. The arm hung from a huddled heap at the bow and, in the evening gloom, I could just see the body, face downward, spreadeagled across the low seat. A fishing-rod was lying under the heap.

Callingway spoke first. "My God! That's——"

I turned and went down the steps to the terrace-way. I ran along the river-path to the mooring-post. I got the boat as it slid to the bank, pulled it in and fixed the rope in the post.

Callingway was breathing heavily on my neck. I rose and walked towards the steps. "He's dead."

Callingway said in a trembling voice, "He's been shot."

CHAPTER TWO

THEY don't have coroners in Scotland. The man who does the same kind of job is the Procurator Fiscal. This one was bald, blue-eyed, slow and very thorough. His name was Bogey, and his court of inquiry was held in the little schoolhouse in Gilfillan main street.

There were about fifteen of us in the room. All round the walls were crayon drawings and paintings done by schoolchildren. A blackboard with some simple sum scrawled on it was propped in a corner out of the way. The room smelled of modelling clay and carbolic, and the morning sunshine splashed patches of light on the walls and floors. From where I sat I could see Mrs. Kelso in a sober grey suit, white-faced and placid; Callingway with the same startled-child look as when we first saw the body in the boat; Anderson in a fresh blue suit and looking more worried than I had ever seen him these last three days; the police sergeant with the heavy boots mumbling a rehearsal of his evidence and consulting his notebook; the constable sitting stiffly and holding his cap; the doctor, grey-haired and tired-looking; some of the hotel guests coughing politely and whispering reverently among themselves. There were one or two other people I did not know.

The Fiscal called the court to order and outlined why we were gathered. He told us how the body was found and how dead it was and how it got that way—by sporting-type pellets through the head.

Then he called on a Mr. Seton, and a young, fresh-faced man wearing a tweed hacking jacket stood up.

Bogey said, "You are Mr. Richard Seton?"

"Yes, sir."

"Of Eighteen, Lansley Mansions, Wengate, Surrey?"

"Yes."

"Tell us, Mr. Seton, what you told me earlier today, relevant to the—er—to the death of Mr. James Kelso."

Seton looked nervous. He kept rubbing his hands together and his breathing became a little faster.

"Take your time, Mr. Seton. You an—er—you may sit down."

Seton did so. He rubbed the palms of his hands on his handkerchief and said, "I—er . . ." He gulped.

"Take your time, Mr. Seton. This is not a court of law—simply a quiet inquiry."

Seton tried again. This time his voice was husky and the sentence came out in one breath. "I—killed him."

There was a breathless buzz from the other people in the court. One woman squealed. Bogey used his little hammer to get quiet. Then he said: "Now, Mr. Seton—you must not get yourself so overwrought. Explain everything—just as you told it to me."

Silence. The court held its breath and listened to Seton's. Then

he swallowed and began: "I—I was shooting duck. I got down near the river—where the reeds are—and I—I fired. I knew I had fired too low—I *knew* it——!" he sobbed.

Bogey's kindly voice said: "Now, take it easy, Mr. Seton. You are not being blamed for anything at this stage. You are a guest of Sir George Amoy, are you not?"

Seton nodded.

"And you were shooting duck most of the evening in the upper part of the river? Now go on from there."

There was a pause while Seton pulled his mouth nervously, took a breath, then he said in a calmer voice: "I had been shooting for about an hour—I don't know the time, but I think it was about half past eight or nine. I worked my way down to the river through the reeds and I did—quite a lot of shooting. Most of it was—low. I—I'm not a very good marksman. I—I was aiming very low." He took another deep breath. "I missed ducks a lot and I remember thinking I was far too low——"

He waited. Bogey nodded.

"Thank you, Mr. Seton." Seton sat down.

Margo Kelso didn't have much to say but she said it quietly and without much emotion one way or another. She told how her husband took up Anderson's offer to go after the salmon for an hour, how he went down with the gear to the boat—and that was the last time she saw him alive.

Bogey asked her: "You told me how you went for a walk later along by the river, Mrs. Kelso. Was it your intention to join your husband?"

"Yes," she answered in a quiet tone. "I went out for a walk just before nine. I thought perhaps I could walk along the river bank and maybe reach where he would be fishing—then I'd walk back."

"But you didn't do so?"

"No—there was no path up that part of the river—just tall reeds."

"You heard gun-shots?"

"Oh, yes—all the time. I knew there must be someone shooting duck."

"You and your late husband owned the bungalow called Madriga barely a mile from the hotel—that's so, isn't it, Mrs. Kelso?"

"Yes."

"But you weren't staying in the bungalow?"

"No," she said. "We'd been up earlier in the day but we decided to stay the night at the hotel because the bungalow hadn't been fired for some days and the bedrooms had a damp atmosphere."

"Thank you, Mrs. Kelso."

The rest of the session was thorough but unspectacular. The pellets found in Kelso's body tallied with those used by Seton in his gun. Seton was asked to demonstrate approximately the angle at which he mostly fired the gun; there was some evidence as to the height of the tall reeds at the river; positions were drawn on a blown-up map of the area; I said my piece about how we saw the body in the boat; Callingway gave similar evidence; the policemen read to us their reports, which consisted largely of words from a dictionary.

There was one more hoop for Seton and he went through it fairly and steadily. Bogey asked him. "For how long have you been a guest of Sir George Amoy, Mr. Seton?"

"Four days, sir."

"Did you, by any chance, know the deceased?"

"No, sir."

"Or his wife or any of his friends?"

"No, sir."

"Is this your first visit to Sir George's place?"

"No—my second. I was here last Christmas."

"But this is your first visit for the purpose of duck-shooting?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you."

The Fiscal summed up later. He pointed out the lesson in this "tragic accident", said a lot of things about the hazards of angling near where amateurs are pulling triggers, remarked on the very tall reeds at the river and said that the cause of death was by misadventure. Nobody's fault.

Everybody was glad it was over.

We filed out of the little classroom and for a second I saw a dirty old raincoat I thought I knew. The shoulders inside it were bunched, sloping. I lost sight of them in the shuffling crowd.

I met Seton in the hallway. He was still sick-looking and his young lips were set hardly.

I approached him. "I'd like to tell you how sorry I felt for you in your position, Mr. Seton."

He shrugged and his mouth crooked. "It's certainly cured me of duck-shooting for life."

He seemed to be waiting for someone so I lingered with him at the doorway. "It's been an education to me, Mr. Seton. I never knew that the ammunition used for ducks could be so lethal—especially from a gun like the one you were using."

He shrugged. "I always knew it. A Cumberland's the most popular gun of the lot. It all depends how close you are and where the shot enters the body. I must have—been—pretty close—among the reeds." He swallowed. "He got it—in the head, y'know."

"I know. It was Callingway and I who found him."

"Yes, of course—your name's Daly."

A bald-headed, elderly man came out of the crowd, took Seton by the arm silently, and led him off. I fingered the rim of my hat and thought for a while as the people went past. Then I went out into the autumn sunshine. The man with the shabby raincoat was standing at the gate, his back to me. He turned round as I walked on the pavement.

"Get anything from Seton?" he asked.

I looked at the dry, lined, tired-looking face under the stained felt hat. "The law! All the way from Glasgow."

Pollok almost smiled but the effort seemed to tire him and his face resumed its bland, sad look. We shook hands.

I said: "Let's have a drink."

He said: "Let's have tea. I'm on duty."

We found a baker's shop called The Nest with a tea-room at the back. It was a very feminine-looking place—quiet, cosy.

In the tea-room he crossed his legs and munched a coffee-bun. I stirred my tea and said:

"You were saying?"

"I wasn't."

"Weren't you just telling me what brings a cop nearly two hundred miles from Glasgow to listen to the local Fiscal telling us how somebody gets duck pellets through his head?"

"You haven't changed, Daly. You see something in everything." He sighed.

I grinned. "That's right."

"I might be on holiday here."

"But you just said you were on duty."

"All right. Maybe I like Procurator Fiscals' inquiries."

I shook my head. "Pack it." I leaned forward. "Harry, you're

the bestest, loveliest, sweetest thing I've seen in weeks. You know I found Kelso's body?"

He nodded. "You and Callingway."

"I found everything you heard in that evidence. Just a gun accident. He goes fishing. He gets too near a duck-shooter and their sports get a bit mixed up. He gets killed. Simple."

Pollok nodded. "Very simple."

"Nothing complicated."

"Not a thing."

I grinned. "But you know how it is—with guys in our kind of business, I mean. We get feelings—little doubts and hunches about even the simplest cases that have no complications at all. No evidence. Just as if you got the faintest smell of gin from the breath of a girl you were kissing. You'll know about that, Harry."

He chewed his bun.

I went on: "And that's the kind of faint whiff I got from this Kelso shooting. But the whiff was getting fainter and fainter. You heard the evidence. Seton was shooting at that spot where Kelso was fishing. He fired his gun—a Cumberland Six. Kelso was shot at that time—and killed by pellets from a Cumberland Six. Seton says he fired low. Did I say there was a whiff?" I shook my head. "Not a trace of it this morning. If ever there was a clean-cut case of accidental shooting—this is the classic." I paused. "Then I see you. Just passing. Just taking a languid interest. Just listening to a grey-haired Fiscal telling us about the dangers of firearms." I breathed. "All the way from Glasgow. You drive overnight. And Kelso was a Glasgow man. Harry—you're the private eye's personal good fairy. Where you are, there's big trouble. And I don't feel a whiff any longer. I'm being asphyxiated with the smell of cordite!"

He swallowed the last of his bun and took a sip of tea. Then he said: "You read too many detective books, Daly."

I sighed. "That's right. Maybe I do." I made to pick up my hat. "Anyway—what's Kelso to me? He's dead."

He pulled out a packet of cigarettes and offered me one. "You saw him in the hotel?"

I took the cigarette. "Sure. I saw him pretty close—for about a couple of hours."

"Did you notice anything funny about his behaviour?"

I lit his cigarette and mine. "Funny?"

"Yes. Anything that might have been a bit odd?"

"Sure. Plenty."

He examined the lit end of his cigarette. "What, f'rinstance?"

"Ah, nothing that would interest you officially, Harry. Just little things. You wouldn't be interested in them."

"I might be."

I exhaled some smoke. "Yes, you might be, Harry—especially if his death brought you two hundred miles to attend the court of inquiry. Now, I wonder what made you rush up here like that."

He pulled the loose skin of his face with his hand tiredly and sighed. "What's Kelso to you? He was a guest in the hotel. You found his body. Just tell me about him at the hotel and leave it there."

I shrugged. "Okay. They came into the hotel around four o'clock. He looked like hell. I think they'd had a quarrel. She was white and ice-bound. I don't think they intended staying, but Kelso came down in an hour and asked Anderson if they could stay. They seemed to have made up their minds about that. At dinner they looked a bit more thawed out and when Anderson announced about the salmon running up in the pool, Kelso spoke to his wife, then said he'd go up for an hour and try a cast."

"When did he leave?"

"Right after dinner. Eight-thirty. I was down at the bridge and we saw him rowing under it on his way upstream."

"Did you hear any gunshots?"

"A few. Just around that time—about nine."

Pollok pulled his mouth.

I said: "You quite happy about the verdict?"

From above his cupped hand over his face his eyes looked at me. He shook his head.

"Why?" I asked. "You got feelings, too?"

He took his hand from his face. "No. We got some facts, though. At the time he was killed, Kelso was supposed to be in London."

"How d'you know that?"

"His office booked him to London—and into a London hotel. Nobody knows he was up here."

I shrugged. "Maybe just a dummy trip to get away with his wife for a few days to their little hideout. They have a bungalow, y'know. How d'you know all this? You been watching him?"

He nodded. "For nearly a year. I had an idea this was coming to him. I don't like his wife. I don't like that bungalow. I don't like anything about it."

I dragged at my cigarette and said nothing for a while. When

Pollok had poured more tea I said: "That's what I mean. You carry it about with you."

"What?"

"Trouble. Killing." I sighed. "And you tell me I read too many detective books. Soon's I saw you outside that schoolroom I knew my hunch wasn't far out. Trouble belongs to you, Polly. You wear it like a hat."

"It belongs to the Glasgow police. And I retire in nine years." He sipped his tea. "It's nothing to you, anyway. He got killed."

"By Seton's duck-gun."

"That's right. Pure accident. You heard what the man said!"

"Sure." I stubbed out my cigarette. "It doesn't mean a thing to me. I wouldn't've been along at the inquiry except that I found him."

"You and Callingway."

"Yes."

Pollok drew his finger along the little crease of the tablecloth.
"He a friend of yours?"

"Who?"

"Callingway."

I shrugged. "Twenty pounds a day plus expenses. That size of friend."

"You doing a job for'm?"

"Uh-hu."

There was silence while Pollok waited on me telling him more. I didn't. Then he said, "In whisky, isn't he?"

I said, "So they tell me."

"What's the job? A woman?"

I grinned. "Sir, you speak of the client I love."

He called the waitress over to get the bill.

I asked, "Why're you interested?"

He collected the bill and rose. "The police've always got reasons for these interests. That's why Rae sent me here—soon's Gilfillan police told him somebody was dead where Callingway was near."

"You know Callingway?"

"Should do. He's called us in often. Almost used a flame-thrower on Rae and me last Monday before he came here."

I picked up my hat. "What about?"

"Same thing as he's employing you for."

I grinned. "That brings us back to the beginning."

He paid the bill at the cash desk and followed me out into the

sun-lashed street. We stood on the pavement. Pollok dug his hands down in his raincoat pockets and looked at me.

"Did Callingway tell you the police were still on his whisky stealing?"

"I didn't say anything about whisky stealing."

He looked down the quiet main street. "Last time you clammed on me, Daly, it nearly cost you your detective business."

I said nothing.

Pollok asked, "What's the job?"

"I'll tell you—when Callingway says I can."

He sighed. Then he looked at me. "I'll give you a bonus."

"What?"

"Kelso had an interest in whisky."

I paused in inhaling my cigarette.

"What kind of interest?"

He almost grinned. "I'll tell you—when Rae says I can." He turned and walked towards the railway station.

It was noon when I got back to the hotel. The place seemed deserted. There were no cars in the drive, the hall was empty, the Andersons hadn't yet returned.

I went into the little bar. It was empty—except for the slick-haired barman reading a newspaper. He uncoiled himself and folded the newspaper.

"Nobody around?"

"No, sir. Haven't come back from the inquiry yet. Is it over?"

"All over. Double Scotch."

"What did they say?"

"An accident. Death by Misadventure. Have one yourself."

He filled the glasses. "Thank you, sir. Mrs. Kelso was in and checked out. She left the bungalow key."

"Does she do that?"

"What?"

"Leave the bungalow key here?"

He nodded. "Yes. Mr. Anderson keeps it—and sends somebody up to clean it now and then."

"Funny they should have a bungalow just up the hill and stay in the hotel for a night."

"Must've plenty of money. Mind you, it can be chilly this time of the year coming into a bungalow that's not bin fired. Gets cold at nights."

I sipped my whisky. "And damp, I suppose."

"You're right. Damp—so near the sea."

"Anyway, she's off."

"That's right."

"Long ago?"

"Just ten minutes ago. She seemed very upset."

I lit a cigarette. "Where'd the Kelsos come from—Glasgow, was it?"

"That's right. Terrible thing—terrible."

"Same again. Mr. Callingway back yet?"

He filled both glasses again without batting a blinker. "No, sir. I expect he'll be here for lunch."

I lit a cigarette. "Was Kelso a keen angler?"

"Seemed to be." He jerked his thumb towards a twenty-pound stuffed salmon in the glass case behind him. "He was asking me all about this one before lunch yesterday." He shook his head. "I can hardly believe he's away." The two whiskies were catching up.

I talked through my cigarette smoke. "Was he in here before lunch?"

"Yes. Gin, he had—plain gin."

"You mean before dinner?"

He looked at me. "No. Lunch."

"But they only arrived in the afternoon."

"I know, but Mr. Kelso was here for lunch himself."

"Himself?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Nothing." I drained my glass. "I must've been mistaken."

I met Callingway on the drive as I was taking my bag to the car.

"You off?" he said.

"Yes."

"Nasty business. Glad it's all over."

I heaved the bag in the boot. "So'm I."

"One of those things. Damn rotten luck."

"I'm sorry for Seton."

He pulled his chin. "Yes. Nice lad."

I closed the boot and locked it. "You can't remember about Kelso yet, I suppose."

"Remember about him?"

"Yes—where you met him?"

"Met him?" His face cleared. "Oh—I see. No—I must've been

mistaken altogether. Must've been somebody else I was thinking about."

I straightened up. "Well—I better get going."

"Where're you going?"

"Glasgow."

"Glasgow? You—got any news or something?"

I opened the car door and threw in a small brief-case. "News? No—nothing."

"This shooting business has held me up all over. Have to leave for Aberdeen tomorrow. If you pick up anything you'd better report to Henderson of United Shipping. He'll know where to get me."

I decided there was no time like now for getting the small-print paragraphs explained. "How d'you mean, pick up anything?"

"Well—any news that Henderson might pass on to my committee or the police about the stealing."

I leaned one hand against the car. "One client I never have, Mr. Callingway, is a committee. Another is the police."

"Well, you know I'm not acting entirely on my own with this business, Daly. There's the Association Committee."

"As far as I'm concerned you're my client. You pay me a sweet fee and you said you wanted results."

He dug his hands into his tweed overcoat pockets and pursed his lips. "We want results all right. But you can't do this on your own. Not a thing this size."

"You can't do it with any *more* than one. It's strictly person-to-person—and that's the way I like to work."

"And how're we to know what you're doing?"

"You won't. If you want it, I'll give you a kind of up-to-date *résumé* now and then—that's all. But I prefer not to. The more people know about the probe the less chance we'll have of stopping the grabs."

He sighed. "All right. I hope you know what you're doing."

I said nothing.

He made to turn away. "Where will I find you if I want you?"

"Embassy Hotel, Glasgow. If I move I'll leave word."

Callingway said, "By the way—why Glasgow?"

I said, "You know what they say—there's a lead to every crime in Europe in Glasgow."

He looked as though he wasn't sure if I was kidding, so I continued, "—but that's the least of the reasons."

He shrugged and held out his hand. "You know best. G'bye." We shook hands and he went into the hotel.

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN I drove up out of the bay the main coast road south swept before me through a russet-and-yellow countryside. Trees were gold-spangled in the bright autumn sun and there were no clouds in the clear, cold, blue sky. A brown leaf slapped against my side window and blew away. The car sighed up to eighty and I settled back to the long drive through the tree-lined road splashed with yellow sunshine.

I thought a great deal about Kelso's death. Like Pollok, I felt uneasy about that Procurator Fiscal's verdict. The case was aerated with holes the size of my head.

Maybe it was me. Maybe *any* private dick would be building up all kinds of screwy theatrical possibilities out of a case like that. Nobody else seemed to think it was anything else but an accident. Just Pollok and me.

I would have given a lot to know why Kelso and his wife came into the hotel looking like hangovers. They seemed to be living in the ice they had just refrigerated themselves half an hour previous. In my language, they'd had one helluva domestic row.

Yet everything seemed to be all right at dinner. I didn't trust the feline smile, but there it was—it was a smile. And Kelso looked genuinely thawed. Why the quick temperature change? Had she won some point? Had she "got round" him about something?

Where had the Kelsos been before coming to the hotel. Mrs. K. told the Fiscal they'd been to the bungalow but decided not to stay because it was cold and a little damp. Reasonable. But Kelso himself had been in the hotel before lunch. Why? Didn't Anderson know this? Or was this why Anderson looked so worried during the Fiscal's inquiry? His barman knew it. He said Kelso looked troubled about something, had a few quick drinks and lunch, then went out. Another thought about Anderson—how does a man know from half a mile away whether salmon are taking flies or not?

I didn't know whether to believe Callingway or not when he said he didn't know Kelso, that he'd mistaken him for someone else. I saw them nod to each other at dinner—and I saw Kelso's

nod. There was no mistake about that. Client or no client, I couldn't dig my face in the sand and forget him in connection with this Kelso death. I *saw* his muddy shoes when he approached me at the bridge. Naturally, he was upset and excited when he saw Kelso's body in the boat. But it was *he* who said, "He's been shot!" —not me. Nobody with any eyes could have imagined that Kelso had been drowned or poisoned or asphyxiated; his head wound was too bad for that. But how could Callingway say right away "He's been shot"? Pollok spoke of Callingway as if he suspected him of something—and you could bet this suspicion was shared by friend Rae, he of the bald head and cobra eyes at Headquarters. What was it? Was there some kind of connection between Kelso's death and this whisky-stealing racket on which I'd been engaged? Pollok said Kelso had some connection with whisky.

Where was Margo Kelso when her husband was shot? She passed us on the bridge ten minutes before I saw the boat drift downstream. At the court she told us she'd gone for a walk but turned back when she found no path by the river. Was this true? In a way I could understand her packing and leaving the hotel in a hurry after her return from the court. But I couldn't understand *that* size of hurry.

Yet, for all this dramatic speculation, Kelso had been shot—by a Cumberland duck-gun fired through the tall reeds from a range of twenty feet. And a fresh young man called Seton admitted firing the gun around that time from roughly that distance at that spot. That, I thought, should satisfy Daly. But it didn't.

It was after five o'clock when I reached Glasgow—dead on time for the evening traffic crawl. It took me an hour to get into the centre of the city. I slid along Alexandra Parade from the north-east, got lost in the truck-packed jungle of High Street and emerged crawling along Cathedral Street towards the roar of the business area. The street lamps and shop windows were lit; it was a dull, bleak evening with drizzle already spotting my windscreen.

I parked the car in Central Station and checked into the Embassy Hotel. I had a drink in the American Bar and listened to English commercial travellers say how glad they were to get out of the city that night, Scots commercial travellers say how glad they were to get out of England alive and two Americans who said very little. A blonde was displaying her lips, her teeth and the vacuum behind those blue, blue eyes. I needed another drink to stand up to her accent even for ten minutes.

After my meal I went to see the hall porter. He was a big, spare-haired man who looked like an over-fired cop.

I said, "I want some information about a friend of mine."

He inclined his head like a politician listening to one of his constituents. "Kind of information, sir?"

"I want to know where his place of business is—and what sort of business it is."

He pursed his lips. "Telephone directory, sir?"

I shook my head. "I need more than that. Any idea where I might get some business directories or yearbooks?"

"Tonight, sir?"

"Yes."

He made a face as if he could think. Then he looked up, beaming. "Library, sir—the Trantem."

"What's that?"

"The Trantem Library, sir—in South Street. You can't miss it—big place, it is. They keep open till ten for the students. They'll have directories and all that."

"That'll do." I gave him a tip.

The Trantem was a place of hush and rubber flooring and notices that told you not to do very much except read. There were dozens of clever-looking people sitting chewing pencils or looking into books as if they were eating them. I went over to a desk marked "Enquiries" with a very curvaceous brunette sitting behind it and a pair of thick-rimmed glasses.

I said, "I'm looking for a book about the advertising business—a directory that might tell me who's who."

She took off the glasses and came round to the bookshelf in front of the desk. "Here's the *Advertising Yearbook*. Would that help?"

"I'll try it. Thanks."

She went back to her throne.

It took me fifteen minutes to find the part I wanted. The book gave a list of the main advertising agencies in Britain with the names of their directors, some of the senior staff like Space Buyers and a list of the accounts they handled. Kelso's agency was tucked among the "Provincials". It gave the name of the directors as Mr. and Mrs. Kelso, the manager someone called Farquhar, then the names of about a dozen accounts. Four of them were liquor accounts. It gave the brand names of four whiskies. I shut the book and went back to the girl in the glasses.

"Fine," I said. "I got what I wanted. Now there's something else

I'd like to find out." I leaned my elbow on the desk. "Is there any book that could tell me what some of the bigger firms spend on their advertising in this country?"

She looked blank but still beautiful. "What they spend?" She frowned in thought. "I can't think of any book——"

A man in a dark grey suit and with a mole on his cheek appeared behind the desk. She spoke to him about my query. He stroked his chin for a time then he came over to me. "You mean—what they spend in advertising?"

"That's right."

He stroked his chin again. Then his face brightened. "There's a quarterly supplement published by one of the advertising magazines. I'm sure I've seen something like it there. Try the copies of *Advertising Monthly*, Miss Trench."

She did. He was right.

This is what I found out. Kelso Advertising handled fourteen accounts. Of these, only four were quoted as spending nationally anything worth quoting—"Kilty Whisky", "Allison McGregor Whisky", "Clan Forrest Whisky" and "Scotch Dirk Whisky". The last was the largest spender. The rest were probably accidents—or clients who drifted into the agency and were as astonished as Kelso when he took them on. Summary—Kelso Advertising was a four-account agency more or less specializing in liquor advertising.

I leaned back against the hard, floor-bolted library chair and did some imagining. These four whiskies were quite big advertising accounts. That review of expenditures said they each spent an average of thirty thousand pounds in one year. Not bad handling—for a provincial agency. Now, I thought, what happens to smaller advertising agents—or any kind of agents—that handle four large luscious accounts? They get jittery. They get scared in case one of them blows. Unless there's a contract.

Did Kelso have a contract? Would a large whisky firm give a small agency a contract? I always imagined advertising accounts—even the big ones—were mercurial. They came—they blew. Where did I hear that? Harry Glass told me. And he should know. Harry's been at the top of the ulcer class in the advertising business in London for a long time.

I rose and went back to the curves. "Thanks for the book. Can you tell me now how I can find out who are the directors of certain firms?"

She took off the glasses. "Advertising firms? But you——"

"No. Just—other kinds of firms."

She bit one end of the glasses prettily. "Well—let's see. Scottish firms?"

"Yes."

She frowned. "Mm. Yes. Try over there—that second rack from this end. You'll find volumes of company registrations with an index. They're not right up to date, but you may get what you're after."

"Thanks."

She was so right again. I found the directors' names of all four whisky firms. The company registration details looked quite normal to me. I made a note of all the directors.

I went back to my curvaceous card index.

"This might even be getting tiresome," I said. "But I have one last request for tonight."

She showed me her white, white teeth. "What is it?"

"Have you a kind of 'Who's Who' of company directors?"

She led the way to a corner bookshelf. "That's an easy one." She picked up a six-pound tome and weighed me down with it. "Best of luck."

I flicked over the pages. Only the Scotch Dirk directors were listed—Alastair Graham and Walter Connolly.

I said good night to the lady and she seemed surprised but pleased. I was pleased, too. There was no connection at all between Kelsos and Callingway or his whisky.

Ever since Callingway had officially engaged me I had been wondering if there would be another big whisky theft soon. If so, I wondered where and when it would be. And I hoped the gang would stay idle long enough for me to get my bearings on the case.

I didn't have long to wait for the next steal. A report of it was hitting me in the face at my breakfast in the hotel next morning. The headline ran, "Another Big Whisky Haul", and the report said that a full lorryload of malt whisky consigned from a distillery at Inveraray, Argyll, to Glasgow was stopped at the Rest-and-Be-Thankful hill, the driver laid out and the whisky stolen. The empty lorry had been picked up twenty-five miles away. There was no trace of the stolen whisky and the driver of the lorry could offer only a vague description of the three men who attacked him. The whisky was the property of Graham and Connolly Ltd., who also owned the distillery at Inveraray.

There it was—just behind my cornflakes. Another big steal. Callingway would be nursing ulcers this morning. Graham and Connolly—who were they? I remembered. "Scotch Dirk" whisky—and that was one of the accounts handled by Kelso Advertising. And Kelso had died on Wednesday night—shot by a duck-gun. I thought that, for a country of five million population, Scotland was one very, very small place. And any actuary will tell you that the smaller the group the higher the average of things happening. What no actuary could tell me was why the latest victim of a whisky-stealing racket should have a loose connection with a man who was killed two days ago.

The autumn sales were on and the city was packed. Right along Argyle Street crowds of parcel-laden women were looking at shop windows, struggling on to tramcars, quietening tired children, milling, jostling, bundling. There was a traffic jam at the corner of Union Street and two policemen and some men were trying to get a punctured truck to the side of the road while lines of buses, trams, cars waited patiently.

I looked at my watch. Ten-thirty. I signalled a passing taxi and climbed in. "*Dispatch offices*," I said.

I took the elevator to the fourth floor and walked through a double-door to what looked like a Stock Exchange set in an indoor football pitch. The rows of desks went right back and disappeared in the distant fog of cigarette smoke. The constant din was a medley of typewriter noises, telephones, loudspeakers, tape-recorders, talk, talk, talk. Long-legged boys hurried along with galley proofs, copy-sheets, newspapers, cups of tea. A worried-looking man sat on a desk and wrote on a pad holding the telephone to one ear with his shoulder. Over at the far wall shirt-sleeved types were having one murderous row with a compositor in dungarees and head-visor.

"Mr. Lamont," I said to the clerk at the nearest desk. "Dick Lamont."

He looked up from his pile of newspapers. "You got an appointment, sir?"

"No. You need one?"

He gave me a look as if he expected me to know things I didn't. "Well, we're putting the street edition away, sir. It's ten-twenty."

"Is Mr. Lamont in?"

"He's in the case-room. We're running in ten minutes."

"Can I wait in his room?"

He shrugged. "Okay. Door at the end of this room—second on the right."

As I walked up through the forest of desks, the noise and the movement and the tension seemed to go up one point every second. By the time I disappeared through the cigarette smoke, it was like an inferno. Then I opened the door second on the right, walked through, and closed it behind me. Silence. I stood on inches of soft, black, fitted carpet hearing nothing but the distant traffic through the half-open window. The desk was gun-metal colour and there were yards of it with nothing on its sleek surface but one white telephone. The chair was the same colour. The walls were cherry-red and two fancy lemon-coloured curtains drifted idly at the window before a huge, pall-slung venetian blind.

I sat on the other chair and put my feet up comfortably on the edge of the gunmetal area which was so deserted I even had to smoke my own cigarettes.

Five minutes later Dicky Lamont came in. He wore a grey gaberdine shirt over dark-brown slacks and his sleeves were rolled up. He was stouter now and wore a yellow bow tie. He stared at me. "Ken. For Pete's sake. They didn't tell me you were here."

I lifted my heels from the desk. "I was pretending what it must be like to be a big shot on a newspaper."

He shook hands. "What're you doing in Glasgow?"

"Getting out of it as fast as I have this case over."

"Still running your own place in London?"

"Uh-uh."

He came round the desk and sat down. "This is your second trip to Glasgow. You were up last year on the Lameron case."

"I know. I must like your city, Dickie."

He grinned. "Well, you know what they say, Ken—you'll find a lead to every crime case in Europe——"

I held up my hand. "Oh—no!" I threw my arm over the back of the chair and sat back. "You still on crime, Dick?"

"Yes, Why?"

"You look too lush. I thought—maybe they'd moved you up to circulation or home-page recipes."

He opened a drawer, took out two cigarettes and threw one over. "Ninety per cent of the news in this city is about crime. Ninety per cent of *our* news is about crime. Ergo."

"You're the top boy."

"That's it." He lit our cigarettes. "And that brings us back to your case."

I sat back. "That's right. I want a whole background filled in, Dicky."

"Name it."

"Whisky stealing."

Dicky closed his eyes then opened them. "Did you pick that from the morning papers with a pin?"

I grinned. "You can't say I don't keep topical."

"Don't tell me Graham's engaged you *this* fast——"

I shook my head. "This latest steal is nothing to do with me being on the job. Just coincidence."

"Just bad luck. I bet whoever's engaged you's blowing fuses this morning."

"I bet they are. I want the whole story, anyway, Dick—right from the beginning."

He picked up the telephone, dialled two numbers and waited. Then—"Mavis—bring in the Breadalbane whisky file. And some coffee." He leaned back and drew his hand over his face. "You certainly pick them."

"I didn't. It picked me."

"Who's your client?"

"One of the Association moguls."

He lifted his eyebrows. "Callingway?"

"Yes. You know him?"

Dicky shrugged. "I met most of them when the heat started. Pollok at Police H.Q.'s been on the case with Rae ever since the beginning."

"Give me the headlines. When *did* it start?"

"The first big pinch was about two years ago. A truck loaded with whisky casks left Breadalbane distillery near Newtonmore in Inverness-shire. Two miles beyond Blair Atholl the driver was signalled to stop by two men who were standing beside another truck. He remembers getting out of his cab—and that's all. They sapped him and trussed him up. When he came round he was lying on a peat-bog three miles away and when he got back to his truck the whisky was gone."

"Sounds very uncomplicated."

"Very."

The door opened and someone with long curves and a short hair-do came in. She laid a large file on Dicky's desk. "It was nice

and handy. The boys have been using it all night. That's just the local stuff. I've got the national coverage if you want it."

"This'll do. We said it all, anyway."

She turned to go. "I'll fetch the coffee." She smiled at me and I tried to keep my eyes on her teeth.

Dicky was opening the file in which hundreds of press clippings were stacked and tied with light cord. I said: "What happened? Did the President of U.S.A. get mixed up in it?"

He grinned. "I told you we said it all. There are another three files with the national and syndicate reports if you're staying for another month."

I said, "I suppose you did run some ads as well when you published these."

"We found the space." He pulled out a drawer-tray and stubbed his cigarette in a little ashtray. "It was one of my mistakes. I rode this one myself for nearly two months. I put two of my best men on the story night and day. My editor was blowing fuses every headline." He shrugged. "It was just a mistake. I had to pack it—or lose readers. The edition that's running now says no more about this latest case than the other papers. Just facts."

"I must join a printer's union. Do they get paid by the line?"

Dicky smiled. "Anyway, there it is." He patted the fat file. "Seven weeks we ran it."

"You certainly rode it. What was there to say? Somebody grabbed the whisky. It's all I can see."

"Can you hell! You're just saying it. You know as well as I that there's no future in grabbing twelve casks of under-proof whisky that may not even have *started* maturing. Grow up."

I sat back.

Dicky went on: "That was a Highland malt whisky. So was the stuff stolen yesterday. It disappeared. In a country this size it's one helluva job disappearing with twelve casks of one special kind of whisky. Callingway's probably told you they can't trace it. What did these characters do with it?"

"You tell me."

He shrugged. "That's what two of my best reporters spent seven weeks trying to find out."

The door opened and Mavis came in with the coffee. She put the tray down and paused with a spoon over the sugar-bowl, smiling at me very, very nicely. "Sugar?"

Dicky said: "Mr. Daly's a big boy, Mavis. He knows how to sugar his coffee."

I grinned as she left us. "She's fancy. Did that go with the promotion?"

He took his cup over. "I have to watch her. I have her on loan from the Advertising manager for two weeks." He sipped the coffee. "She probably thinks you're a glamorous, big-time crook."

"Thanks."

"Where was I?"

"You were telling me all the dope on this whisky racket that you couldn't print—the stuff you couldn't get proof on. You know—where the news of the freight came from and——"

"I was telling you nothing like that."

I grinned. "But you will."

He sipped the coffee. "Ken, this story really hurt me." He put his forefinger and thumb together. "We were within *that* of it. If I'd had another three weeks I could've got on to something. But old Gutterpants upstairs gave me ulcers about what happens to crime newsmen who won't let go on a case—and I had to drop it. Then we had a spate of routine murders in the city and I had to get going on these—and forgot all about the whisky grab. Now I can't even enthuse enough to run a cut of yesterday's steal showing the wrecked lorry."

I said, "In the first place, what could anybody do with twelve casks of this malt whisky?"

Dicky looked through the window. "There are three aspects of that question. First—don't forget the value of the freight. Matured or not, malt whisky or not, it's still Scotch whisky—worth thousands. Second—it could be blended with a grain whisky and you've got a good saleable commodity whatever your taste is. Third—it could be matured in a hurry. At least the maturing could be completed in a hurry."

"Could it? You're sure of that?"

He turned the corner of his mouth in a smile. "Sure of it? Ken, I dug out *five* methods. The Germans invented a way of maturing it years ago by passing it through a vat with suspended silver nitrate particles. The American illicit stillers are doing it every day with electricity. Or you can simply blow air through it. I just hate to think how quick you can do it with electronics."

I stroked my face. "To get the maximum return from that malt

whisky, then, whoever stole it would have to do these things—mature it and blend it with a grain spirit?"

"But quick. Listen, Ken—I wrote up a case two years ago about an enterprising plumber in the east end of Glasgow who set up a small spirit still in his bathroom and piped off about two gallons of hooch a day. It took the Revenue men exactly eight days three hours to find it and grab him. These Revenue characters in Scotland can smell illicit whisky—distilling or blending—at a clear distance of one hundred miles on a windy day. It's a small country and we've got a helluva lot of cops and Revenue people. D'you see the point?"

I accepted his cigarette. "Did the police find anything? What about the casks?"

He shook his head. "Same as yesterday's job—not a thing. Nothing. And these casks are valuable. Sherry casks—specially for maturing. Cost the earth."

"You think it is a gang job?"

"Certain."

"They must've known about the freight going out of the distillery. How'd they know that?"

Dicky pushed back his cup and saucer. "It wouldn't be hard. They don't treat these runs as Top Secret. Anybody with good undercover technique could find out."

"You were saying about you being nearly on to it. . . ." I waited.

Dicky kept gazing out of the window for a while. Then:

"I don't know. It was just a long shot. I was sitting here one night about ten o'clock working on a morning story when Jim Myers—one of my reporters—phoned me from the Newspaper Club in Edgley Street. He asked me to come up for a drink when I'd finished the story. Although he said nothing over the phone I got the feeling he was on to something, so I went up to the club. All I could see was a lot of smoke and a lot of drinks and Jim Myers and Pete Badger, another of my men, sitting with a guy called Scarlie. I knew him in a vague sort of way. He was a Press photographer—freelance. Which is usually another way of describing a pix-man who's been fired from a staff job on a paper and is trying to flog his way back in. Anyway, Scarlie was jacked to the eyeballs and Jim was desperately trying to slow him up on the gin before he got drowned in it. When I arrived he was just coherent and I think if you squeezed him the gin would have come out his ears."

"After I listened to his blah for about five minutes I began to see

why Myers had asked me to come up. Scarlie knew something about the whisky racket. We played him nice and cosy for a while, gave him another large gin, then started pumping him quietly before he would pass out on us. He kept acting the big boy—you know. ‘Listen—why don’t you fellas get around? I can tell you all about the whisky racket. Tell your editor I’ll give him an exclusive for five hundred quid. Listen—I *know* who they are. An’ I know how they work. Why? ‘Cos I’ve worked *with* them. Yes, sir—worked *with* them!’”

“Did he tell you where or how?”

Dick shook his head. “He kept drooling about the big set-up there was and that they paid *him* for two jobs. Then he passed out.”

I said: “Probably talking through a hole in his head. Probably the gin.”

Dick shook his head. “Not Scarlie. He was juiced, certainly, but there was something in what he was saying. Jim Myers tried to contact him next morning at his digs but he had blown out of Glasgow. We haven’t seen him since. There was *something* there. Scarlie’s got no imagination. He told Myers before I got there that this gang knew all there was to know about quick maturing.”

“Did he say what *his* part was?”

“No, but he said something about one phone call, one hundred quid.”

“Might have been a tip-off man.”

Dick shrugged. “Might’ve been. Who knows?”

I shrugged. “I reckon you’d have had a long, long trail a-windin’ after that.”

“Now don’t *you* start! That’s what Gutterpants said. But I’m a newsman—not a dick. I know a story when I see it and I’m paid to have these kinds of hunches. They come off nine out of ten. I just know that that Scarlie guy and his gin talk added up to twelve casks of malt whisky somewhere somehow.”

I picked up my hat. “Anyway, it gives me something. What about the two whisky grabs *since* that one?”

Dicky patted the clippings. “Three—including yesterday’s. They’re here too—officially. We routined it. I took no personal interest. The editor didn’t want another ride on these—and I like to eat often. But you’ll get all the dope here.”

“Can I borrow the file?”

“No. Read what it says on the outside cover about ‘unauthorized persons.’” He grinned. “Get it back here tomorrow.”

I picked up the file and walked to the door. "See you soon, Dick."

I had been in my hotel room less than half an hour when the phone rang. I sat up from the bed and picked up the receiver.

"Mr. Daly?"

"Yes."

"This is Mavis Sangster—Mr. Lamont's secretary—the one who gave you the coffee in his room."

"Hello, Mavis Sangster."

"Mr. Lamont said I ought to phone you about an address on that Breadalbane case."

I leaned back. "Did he? That was nice of him."

"At least—he said *you* might phone me."

"I had my hand on the receiver."

"I thought you would. So I decided to save you the time."

I lit a cigarette with my free hand. "And you are, Mavis Sangster—you are saving me hours of it."

"Are you being funny?"

"Yes. It's the drink. I've been at the booze."

Her voice sounded a little cooler.

"Well, anyway—here's the Glasgow address of Fred Scarlie. It's Fourteen, Finsmore Street. He always stays there when he comes to Glasgow."

"I've got that."

"When d'you think you'll be sober?"

"Maybe Tuesday."

"G'bye."

"G'bye, Mavis Sangster."

I replaced the receiver and pocketed the scribbled note. I looked at my watch. Twelve-ten.

The telephone rang again.

"Mr. Daly?"

"Yes."

"This is the hall porter. We didn't know you'd returned, Mr. Daly. You had your room key with you."

I sighed. "That's right. Now I'm back."

"There was a message for you at [pause] ten-forty-five. A Mr. Graham phoned——"

I sat up.

"—to say that he would like you to phone him at his office when you returned."

"Mr. Graham? Tell Exchange to get him, will you?"

"Very good, sir."

I waited. I let the phone ring twice before I picked up the receiver. "Mr. Graham?"

"Yes. Is that Mr. Daly?"

"That's right."

The voice sounded young-executive-trying-not-to-waste-any-one's-time—even his own. "If you've seen this morning's papers, Mr. Daly, you'll know who I am."

"You're the Graham of Graham and Connolly?"

"That's right." He uttered a little joyless laugh. "You probably realize why I'm phoning you."

"I've an idea."

"I've been in touch with our Association people and they contacted Mr. Callingway. He's sent word down from Aberdeen that I've to see you as soon as possible."

I lit a cigarette. "I'm glad you phoned, Mr. Graham. I'll be glad to help you if I can."

"Could you come round and see me?"

"After lunch?"

He paused. "Ye'es. That would do. Say—two-thirty?"

"Fine. I'll be there."

CHAPTER FOUR

OVER lunch I read most of the news-cuttings from Dick's file. As Dick had said, the first big theft was a truckload of malt whisky from Breadalbane distillery near a place called Newtonmore in Inverness-shire. The driver, Andrew Caird, left the distillery by the Fort William road at 9 a.m. In the misty, bleak valley of Glencoe there was another truck—empty—standing by the roadside. The driver of this empty truck signalled Caird to stop as if he wanted help. When Caird pulled up and came out of his cabin, he was blackjacked from behind. When he recovered, both trucks were away and he was lying at the roadside. The distillery truck was picked up by the police later—twenty miles away on a secondary road. Very neat.

The second-latest case was the one in which Callingway was directly involved. The distillery was his property. And it was this particular theft about which he had been complaining so bitterly

to the police. Before then, there had been two other steals—one from a lowland grain whisky distillery in Peeblesshire, and another from a distillery near Aberdeen. In each of the latter thefts the technique differed slightly. The grain whisky was stolen at night; the truck was stopped by a man waving a red lamp. Thereafter, there was the usual routine—the driver sapped and the whisky casks transferred to another lorry. At Aberdeen the driver was threatened with a revolver—then blackjacked.

I put the cuttings back in the files and went up to my room. The whole thing was bursting with questions. What did they do with that whisky? Where did they store it? How did they mature it? And how did they sell it?

It was two-fifteen when I came out of the hotel and walked up Hope Street. The sharp autumn winds were still fluffing the newsboys' bills at the corner of Gordon Street. Office workers were hurrying along holding down hats and skirts and flapping coats. At the corner of West George Street I signalled a passing taxi and got in.

Spencer Street lay in the west side of the city beyond Charing Cross. It was a quiet, broad, smooth street with plenty of brass plates and front doors. Number Fourteen was near the top end between a pleasant mews and the main road—Sauchiehall Street. I paid off the cab and went up the terrazzo front steps of the firm of Graham and Connolly Ltd.

Apparently, in offices like this, you simply open the front door, walk in and hope for the best. I did so and walked into a surprisingly bleak, dull-bronze hall. Over on the right was a counter with a little bronze tag which said "Inquiries". I always think there's a big difference between a tag which says "Reception" and one which says "Inquiries". And I had been noticing recently that Scotland had more "Inquiries" than "Receptions". Like City Halls or Municipal Gas Corporations or the places where you pay your rates.

I walked up to this solid, old-fashioned counter and watched three clerks and a girl perched on high stools working at high desks with polished brass rails supporting enormous ledgers. The only person who was worth watching was the girl. She was brown-haired, slim and suited the high stool. The other three types looked as if they might die any time—or had done so yesterday.

Nobody turned round. Nobody did anything. Then I saw the reason—I hadn't pressed the bell on the counter. I gave it a

thump which made me jump and everybody turned round to look at me. The girl's face was even nicer than her curves. The older man with the bald head lifted his eyes over his spectacles and said, "Uh-hu?"

"Mr. Graham's expecting me," I said.

He climbed down from the stool. "What name?"

"Daly."

He walked through the office to a dull brown door on which there were two claymore swords stuck up cross-fashion. He opened the door and walked in. A few seconds later he came out and signalled me to enter.

Alastair Graham looked about thirty-five except when you saw the back of his neck. He wore a most expensive-looking tweed suit. It was the colour of a muddy river-bank on a sunny day. He looked as if he really took care with his appearance—which was something worth caring about. He looked the sort of man who used after-shave lotion and a nail-file. Not sissy—just fussy about grooming the things Nature had doled out so neatly.

He was pleasant and easy to talk to. We shook hands as Uh-hu shut the door behind us. "Sit down, Mr. Daly. I can tell you, I'm glad to see you."

I took off my hat and sat on the polished hide armchair opposite his desk. "You've had trouble, Mr. Graham."

He fetched a decanter of interesting-looking amber stuff and two magnificent *Doch 'n' Doris* glasses. "You'll have a dram?" He poured two sledgehammers. "Yes, I've had trouble. You've probably seen the story in the papers this morning."

I refused the water. "I read it. You're the fourth in eighteen months."

"Yes," he said. "The big difference is that the other three were insured. Cheers." He sipped the whisky.

I stared at him. "You weren't insured?"

He shook his head. "Fire, flood, explosion, atom bombs—insured for everything except this."

I swallowed some of my dram. "What're you down on it?"

"Ten casks—about fifteen thousand quid."

I looked at him. "I don't get it. You knew—"

He waved his hand at me. "Oh, I knew all about the risks. But have you seen the premiums the insurance people are laying? We're not a big business—not big like Callingway. I decided to risk it. I kept thinking it couldn't happen to us. And I was nearly

right, y'know. This was the third truck we'd sent south since the stealing began."

"One in three's a bad gamble."

He shrugged. "Well, there it is. It *did* happen to us." He drank more whisky.

"I wish I could get your whisky back, Mr. Graham."

He rose and walked towards the window. "So do I. But I've an idea we'll never smell it again." He turned to address me. "Where're they taking it? What're they doing with it? How're they getting rid of it—in a country this size?"

I said nothing. I let him talk.

He went on: "How did they know we were sending a truck? They must have tip-off people stationed somewhere." He looked at me bleakly. "You been finding anything since you started, Mr. Daly?"

"Yes," I said. "Quite a bit. It'll tie-in sooner or later."

"Can't be too soon for me."

"Is there anything about your case that's different from what I read in the papers this morning?"

He stroked his face. "No-o. They covered it pretty accurately—specially the *News-Herald*. It was a full payload of Highland malt whisky coming from Inveraray. At the Rest-and-Be-Thankful hill the lorry was stopped by three men. They hit the driver with something and dumped him among the heather. When he came round he got back on the roadway but his lorry was gone."

"I believe the police picked it up later."

"Yes—near Fort William."

"What time was this?"

"About noon."

"I suppose I could see that driver if I want to?"

"Sure. He's at the distillery. Hunter's his name."

I rose. "Thanks, Mr. Graham. I suppose the police are on the case?"

His grin was wry and crooked. "I had Mister Pollock and Mister Rae all afternoon yesterday. Yes—they're on it. *And* the Revenue. *And* Uncle Tom Cobleigh."

I grinned. "And me."

He smiled and shook hands. "Try hard, will you?"

I turned at the door. "That was bad business about your ad agent, Kelso."

He looked up. "Terrible. Did you know him?"

"It was I that fished his body out—with Callingway."

"Was it? I didn't know that." Then enlightenment came over his young face. "Of course—you'd be at that hotel with Callingway!"

"You wouldn't see my name in any of the papers. It was just a simple case—and we happened to be there. I hardly said two words at the Court."

He sighed. "I felt pretty bad about it. We were in the R.A.F. together in the war. I came out and started in whisky. He started his own agency—so I gave him my account."

"I suppose it's quite a big account in that agency now?"

He smiled wrily. "Probably the biggest they have. Quite a small place, y'know, but Kelso *was* a first-class advertising man and he specialized in liquor advertising. He helped as much as anyone to put Scotch Dirk on the map."

"Somebody certainly did that. I see the name everywhere."

He sighed. "That's the way it goes. A young man—forty-four."

"What'll happen to his business?"

"Mrs. Kelso's taking over. I saw her last night and gave her certain assurances about keeping the account. I thought it might get *that* worry out of her mind, anyway."

"Sure," I nodded. "See you later."

"With results," he grinned bleakly.

Anyone with a sense of proportion can walk down Union Street, Glasgow, any Saturday morning and keep sane. It's easy. All you require is an Army tank, a set of earplugs, life insurance and a pair of football boots. The trouble starts when you want to go somewhere specially. Then the whole world around you decides to drive you somewhere else. The crowd pushed me into Woolworth's.

I got out with a packet of razor blades and a crumpled hat into the tramcar-clanging, brake-squealing, pedestrian-pushing street. Nothing in the world would have taken me back by as much as one step, so I had to move on in the crowd.

I got a taxi at the corner of Jamaica Street. "Police Headquarters, St. Andrew's Square," I said. The door slammed and the driver drove through the Argyle Street crowds like a surfboard rider parting the scattering water.

The officer at the front desk took my card and led me upstairs. At the landing hallway he pointed to a form. "Will you wait

there." I sat down. A few minutes later he came through the swing-doors, held one open and nodded along the corridor. "Second door from the end, sir."

There were two untidy desks in the room. Pollok was seated at one of them with a cup of something that steamed in front of him. He was chewing and he held half of a brown bun.

I closed the door. "They didn't say you were at breakfast."

He shifted the bun from one cheek to the other. Then he swallowed and sipped some tea. "Want some tea?"

"I prefer coffee."

He pressed a trigger on an intercom outfit and said, "Fetch in another cup of tea, Agnes." He sat back. "We don't run to *à la carte* here."

I sat down on the hard chair they use for interviews. "Where's Mr. Rae?"

"Out on a case. Somebody coshed his wife out at Gartngad. Did you want to see'm?"

I took off my hat. "In a way. But you might do."

"Thanks."

Agnes brought in my tea. She was a very attractive, shirt-sleeved policewoman of about 36-25-36. She smiled. "I put sugar in."

"Thanks." I was beginning to like beverage-carrying damsels.

When she closed the door Pollok said: "She's a ju-jitsu expert. I thought I'd mention it. What did you want to see me about?"

I sipped the tea. "There's been another whisky theft."

He chewed the remainder of his bun. "I can read."

"I've just left Graham. He tells me he lost fifteen thousand in that one. No insurance."

"So I hear. Sad."

I crossed my legs. "I just found out his advertising's handled by the Kelsos."

"The Kelsos?" His eyes were blank.

"The guy who was killed at Mellion Bay."

He nodded. "That's right, I remember."

"Did you make any inquiries about her?"

He looked at me. "In connection with what?"

"The death of her husband."

"Should we do that?"

I grinned. "You never change, Polly. There's no question and answer with you."

He leaned his thin, droopy figure back on the chair and cleared

the remainder of the bun from his front teeth with his tongue. "I'm telling you this before Rae gets in, Daly. Yes, we *did* check on her—very carefully. Kelso and his wife weren't getting along well together at all. That dinner you saw them enjoy at the hotel was the nearest thing to them being man and wife in months."

"And he was killed an hour later."

"Correct."

I lit another cigarette. "I wish I could get it out of my mind. I can't."

Pollok said: "It's out of *my* mind. I can't get it off my desk—that's my trouble." He tapped a pile of files.

"You're not happy with the Fiscal's verdict, then?"

He shrugged. "Are you?"

"No."

I waited for a while, gently exhaling smoke. Then I said, "I've got another worry."

"What?"

"The more I think of Kelso and his death, the more I think of the job I'm here to do."

He looked out of the window. "They were on the whisky fringe. I said that when I left you at Gilfillan."

"Do you see any connection?"

"Yes."

"What?"

He shoved the pile of files slightly towards me. "Why don't you just take over? Then you can run the Glasgow Police Force."

I grinned. "Last time I was in this city I nearly did."

The door opened behind me and Inspector Rae came in. He was tall, muscular, bald and his blue eyes looked at me without a blink. "Daly. I thought we lost you for good."

We shook hands. "I came up to clean up the city again."

He took off his coat. "Did you? That's nice of you."

Pollok said, "We've just finished cleaning up after his last case here."

I sat down again. "I just dropped in. I was passing."

Rae was already sorting through some of the many papers on his desk. "That, friend Daly," he said, "is a lie."

"That's right," I said. "It's a lie. I came here purposely."

Rae sorted his papers and sat back. "What for?"

"To try and find out what you've got on Callingway."

"What Callingway?"

"The one inside that file."

Pollok hastily gathered the files, including the one boldly marked HENRY CALLINGWAY, and shoved them to the corner of his desk. "I must remember to check if my cuff-links are still on."

Rae's mouth twisted in a half grin which was not unpleasant. "You never miss a throw, Daly."

I bowed my head humbly.

Rae sighed and fingered a pencil. "Callingway's the man who hired you, isn't he?"

"That's right—for the Whisky Association."

He stared at the pencil. "You getting anywhere with your inquiries?"

"Slowly. Some things are beginning to hang together."

He looked at me. "You know we've been on the whisky theft business for months?"

"Yes. Callingway told me."

Pollok said, "I'll bet he did."

Rae said, "Where is Callingway now?"

"Aberdeen."

There was a pause for a while. A passing truck stopped nearby, its brakes squealing. Then I said, "Whoever's making these steals knows his whisky blends."

Pollok looked at his desk. "That's right. It's somebody who knows when to take a malt whisky, when to take a grain."

I said, "A very knowledgeable guy."

Rae said, "Very."

Pollok looked out of the window. "And it's somebody who knows how to mature it fast."

I rose and picked up my hat. "I believe there are ways."

"If they're selling it at all."

Rae looked up at me. "I'm still not quite sure why we're seeing you this morning, Daly. But I want to warn you of this—if you get hold of any information that connects with these whisky thefts you *must* give it here. This is a public case."

I fingered my ear. "I remember you telling me that once before when I was working in Glasgow."

"Well, I'm telling you again. We're not working together on this—you and the police. You're a private investigator—and we have a public job to do. If you get anywhere with your job to your clients, you air it here first."

I opened the door. "I'll try to remember that, Mr. Rae. So far we seem to be running parallel on one thing."

"What?"

"You've got a file on Callingway." I went out.

CHAPTER FIVE

DICK LAMONT was waiting for me behind an open newspaper in the hotel lobby when I returned. He folded up the paper and walked over. "Have lunch with me. I've got news."

I followed him back out of the big swing-doors and went into his car at the kerb.

"What news?" I asked as he drove along Elliot Road.

He kept his eyes on the traffic. "Remember this guy Scarlie I was telling you about—the gone-wrong photographer?"

"Yes," I said. "You tried to pump him one night."

Dick changed gears for the traffic lights. "We're meeting him."

I said nothing for a while. I lit two cigarettes and gave him one as we turned in Park Street. Then I said, "Where?"

Dick stopped the car. "Here—it's a little eating-place I use." He switched off the engine and looked at me.

We got out and went into a small Italian café which smelled of good things. The proprietor grinned and waved to Dick, then came round the counter, buttoned his white coat and bowed us into two small seats at a small table. "The newspaper must be good, eh? It's nearly a month since you been here, Mr. Lamont."

"That's right, Louis. It's nearly a month."

"You're having too many sandwiches and coffee at your desk. You should lunch out more." He held my chair for me. The table was so small I thought this gracious but a little gauche.

"You're telling me the truth, Louis. Too many sandwiches and coffee. I get heartburn." Dick sat down. "My circulation goes up with the newspaper's."

"You'll get indigestion, too." Louis handed us the menu which Dick instantly collected and handed back.

"You say it, Louis." Then he introduced us.

Louis scurried off. I flicked the ash off my cigarette.

Dick said, "He contacted me yesterday afternoon."

I looked up. "To talk?"

Dick nodded.

"And did he?"

"A little. He wanted money—and I had no ready budget for this story. Don't forget what I said about the Chief. He buried this whisky story months ago—and threatened to fire me if I did any coffin-raising."

Louis came along then with two plates of scampi which he presented proudly. When he had gone I said:

"What little did he say?"

"He telephoned me just after three yesterday. He was quite sober and I could almost hear him grind his teeth over the wire. He sounded steamed up about something."

"Like he'd had a disappointment?"

"Yes. I asked him what he wanted and he said he'd meet me somewhere. He wanted to tell me the lot about this whisky stealing. I said I'd meet him in Davidson's—that's a pub near our offices. So I met him there."

"Did he talk?"

"No. At first he said he'd say nothing till he heard my terms. I told him the truth—that I had no money for buying whisky information, but if his song sounded like the right key I'd pass him on to you. You might buy it."

"For how much?"

"He wanted five hundred pounds. At that price, he'd name three members of the gang, say where they were, and say how they operated."

I jabbed some scampi with my fork. "He's an expensive after-lunch speaker."

"I told him to be here at"—he looked at his watch—"two. It's five minutes to two now."

Louis took away our plates and replaced them with a very interesting-looking pork dish. Somebody came into the restaurant and I looked up.

Dick said, "There he is," and waved Scarlie over.

He was big, flabby, loose—like a performing bear out of training. He wore a chestnut-brown jacket, baggy grey flannel trousers and a dark-green tweedy hat. Above his thick lips was a droopy moustache.

Dick said, "Siddown, Mr. Scarlie. This is Ken Daly."

We shook hands. He heaved himself on to a chair at the table and took off his hat. All this time he kept looking at me—even when he took out a cigarette and lit it.

Dick said, "You had something to eat?"

"Yes," he said. "I had something. I'll have coffee."

Dick ordered coffee and we continued with our food.

I said, "Dick tells me you wanted to see me, Mr. Scarlie."

He kept looking at me and shook his head slowly. "I don't particularly want to see you, mister. Let's get *that* bit sorted right at the start."

"All right," I said. "Let's."

He heaved his huge shoulders forward as he drew his finger over the tablecloth and said very quietly and throatily, "I want five hundred pounds. That's number one. Anybody talking in any smaller numerical than that is wasting my time. Dick Lamont here tells me you might be interested in paying that size of money for what I know about this whisky racket. Just you answer me one simple, little question, mister—so's I can save my breath—are you or aren't you?"

I chewed. "I am."

"At that price?"

"Sure." I swallowed. "Just one little teeny thing, Mr. Scarlie. You might be a fake."

He continued his finger over the sugar granules on the table thoughtfully. "That's right, I might be a fake."

I continued eating.

He went on, "That's the risk you take with your money."

Louis brought the coffee and we said nothing as Scarlie sugared it and stirred it. Then Dick said, "You said you know the gang?"

"I worked for them."

"Till when?"

"Yesterday."

I wiped my mouth with the napkin. "Doing what?"

Scarlie grinned fatly. "Now we're getting back to my five hundred."

"What do I get for this that I can't find out myself?"

He leaned forward again and spoke hoarsely. "I'll give you the names of three people in the gang. I'll tell you where to find them. And I'll tell you how they operate. What d'you want for your money? A warrant for their arrest?"

Dick said, "You could at least tell us why you're doing this."

"That's right," said Scarlie. "I could." He grinned. "But I won't. You want the dope—you bring the dough."

"Where?" I said.

"Fourteen, Finsmore Street—top flat. I'll be there tonight. I won't be there tomorrow."

"Is that your house?"

"It's a little studio I use sometimes." He picked up his hat. "If you want the gen—bring the boodle." He rose to go.

Dick said, "Scarlie."

He put on his hat. "Yeah?"

"You're nice and hot. You know that?"

He grinned. "I can take care of myself." He went out.

Callingway walked up and down the hotel bedroom.

"It's a lot of money. A lot, dammit."

I said nothing.

"Five hundred. I don't grudge it. I don't grudge five thousand. But what do we *get* for it? You say you want to pay it over to somebody—just like that. You don't tell me *who* it is—or where he is—or—or what."

I fingered the rim of my hat. "That's right."

"And *tonight*." Callingway turned to me. "Tonight! Why tonight?"

"Tomorrow might be too late."

Callingway was behaving like a general manager considering a raise in pay for the janitor. I thought the time had come for the thumbscrews. I rose. "You don't have to pay it, Mr. Callingway."

He looked at me.

I went on, "You don't have to pay anything to this informant. Instead, you can have me on your payroll for another two months while I find out all the things I could be learning tonight in ten minutes."

He stopped and looked at me. "What makes you so sure this—this informant—isn't a fake? His information might be all rubbish."

"That's right. It might be. It's my opinion it's not."

He leaned against one arm on the mantelpiece and frowned in indecision. "If I hadn't come to Glasgow tonight, what were you going to do about the money?"

"Wire you at Aberdeen for it."

He sighed. "All right, Daly, you can have it. I'll have to get it somehow tonight. Banks are shut." He looked at his watch. "Time's five past eight. Morrison, the manager at this hotel, is an old friend of mine. Wonder if he could cash a cheque? I'll go

and see him. Can you get back here for ten o'clock? I should have the five hundred then."

I got up. "Suits me. I'll be back at ten."

Callingway fetched a bottle and two glasses from a cupboard.
"Have a dram before you go."

"Thanks."

As he poured the drinks he said, "Graham came round to see me earlier this evening."

I said nothing.

Callingway handed me my drink. "He wants me to fire you."

I said nothing.

"For inefficiency." Callingway raised his glass. "Cheers."

I took a drink "Why don't you?"

Callingway eyed me closely from under his grey eyebrows. "I wonder why."

"It's a free country."

"I mean—I wonder why Graham wants me to fire you."

I drained my glass. "I'll tell you one good reason. I haven't been up to Inveraray to see his distillery yet—or to investigate the theft of *his whisky*."

"I know. He mentioned that. He'd just returned from Inveraray and came right up here to me, damn'm."

I said, "You can have it either way, Mr. Callingway—I investigate whisky thieving or I investigate a whisky theft."

"That's what I told him. When I lost my freight, I didn't ask you to concentrate on *that*. It's the *racket* we want stopped."

I put on my hat. "Of course there wasn't much I could do about the theft of *your whisky*, Mr. Callingway. You hired me a week after it happened."

He looked at me. "A week? As much as that?"

"Yes. I checked back."

He shrugged as he opened the door for me. "Anyway, I hired you to work for the Association—not for my own whisky firm."

"That's right. United we stand. Divided we fall." I grinned.
"See you later."

As I walked down the hotel corridor I passed Callingway's uniformed chauffeur who was carrying the jacket and trousers of a black suit. He nodded.

A furniture truck splashed its way along the rain-sodden roadway. A gas-lamp blimp-blumped at the corner and a sad-looking,

soaking dog pattered through a dirty entrance-way. I put my hands in my pockets and walked along past the silent timber sheds and into the gloom of Finsmore Street. I heard, coming through the night, the clink-clank of railway trucks being shunted in a goods yard. Then an engine blew its whistle bronchially from Great Eastern Road direction.

I found number fourteen half-way up the ill-lit street. As far as I could see, nobody stayed in the building. The names painted at the entrance-way belonged to a Turf Accountant, an Agency, somebody's Football Pools, and a scrap merchant. I walked through to the worn, dirty stairs and climbed. The half-landing window had no glass and the traffic sounds from Saracen Road hummed loudly through the opening. The top flight was the third flight and there was only one door on the landing—a dull, untitled, oblong of dreariness. It was open. I went into the dark hallway, my feet sounding softly on bare boards.

"Anybody here?" I said quietly.

Silence.

I opened one of the doors and looked into a drably furnished photographic studio which had a décor of faded apple-green paintwork, dark-brown linoleum, a kitchen sink and dirt. The light was on. There was nobody in the room. I went inside and looked round. What I saw told me nothing. The few pieces of photographic gear—three developing tanks, two corroded, unusable floodlamps and a broken enlarger—seemed to be the only reasons for calling the place a studio. The rest of the furniture and fittings consisted of a bamboo dresser—drawers empty, a card-table with the green baize torn, a photograph of the King of Greece, three empty liquor bottles, a stale half-loaf of bread, two cheesecake magazines and two chairs. The stove was filthy and the fireplace hadn't been used for months.

I stood in the middle of the floor and listened. Nothing—except the distant roar of traffic from the main road. I looked at my watch. Scarlie was overdue by twelve minutes.

It was when I turned round I saw the figure at the doorway. He was leaning against the doorpost, hands in the pockets of his raincoat, his hat shading his small slit-eyes. He was big, broad, and he chewed.

He said, "You lookin' for something?"

"Yes," I said. "A trombone I left here last Christmas."

He unwrapped himself from the door-pillar and walked slowly

towards me. His chin was big, dark, stubbly. His nose was big. His neck was big. He was big, brutish. And he grinned.

"You got the wrong address, dick. You're trespassin'."

I said nothing. I was thinking about when I last used juju.

"You heard what I said, bub. You're breakin' in. You know what happens to smart-alecs that break into houses, don't you?"

I never saw the fist that punched my stomach. I felt the searing, sickening pain and I bent slightly to receive another slam on my jaw that blew starlights before my eyes. I went down. I rolled over to the wall and staggered up. He came at me again and I kneed his stomach with a raker that made him gasp. Then I let him have a straight right that sent him staggering against the card-table. He fell.

The other one came in the door. I heard him shout. I caught sight of a leather jacket, a dark head, a slim, wiry man, before he came at me. I kicked his legs and slammed my left fist between his eyes. He yelled and staggered back as I ran for the doorway, my head bursting with pain.

I almost fell down the dark stairs. I ran and ran as the hoarse oaths sounded behind me. I reached the entrance-way and ran with weakening legs into Finsmore Street. I sprinted along the wet pavement, hearing the thudding footsteps behind me. I saw my car, ran to it, wrenched open the door and got in. I started the engine as they appeared at the corner. I got the car in gear and drove off.

I had the needle at fifty going over Centre Street Bridge and I reached the Roveroy Hotel inside fifteen minutes. I took a deep breath and tidied myself before I walked through the swing-doors. I went over to Reception and asked: "Can I see Mr. Callingway? He's expecting me."

The man behind the desk unwound himself from his crouch and plugged a cord into the switchboard. I waited.

After a time he said, "He's not in his room, sir." He looked at my bruised face cynically.

I straightened myself. "You sure?"

"Quite sure. One-eighty. That's his room."

"Maybe he's at the bathroom."

"He's got a private one. He'd hear the phone. I'll try his chauffeur." He went back to the switchboard.

I said "I'll leave a message. Got an envelope? A large one?"

"Yes, sir." He gave me a bank-size manilla wallet and looked oddly at my bleeding hand.

I sat down at the little hall table, put three hundred pounds in the envelope and wrote a message on a piece of hotel stationery:

11.5 p.m.

Sorry I missed you. Here's some of your money back. Our informant didn't keep his appointment. I'll try him later.

D.

I was about to leave the envelope with the porter when Callingway's chauffeur walked across the hallway to me. He was a quiet, still man, with pale face and hollow eyes. He said:

"Mr. Callingway had to leave hurriedly, sir. He got the eleven-five to London." He betrayed no surprise at all at my battered appearance.

"That's a pity. I wanted to see him. Will you let him have this?"

He took the envelope. "Yes, sir. He'll probably return day after tomorrow. I'll see he gets it."

"Thanks." I went out.

CHAPTER SIX

SHROUDS of morning mist lay like snow over the flat fields, and I turned on my wipers to clear the moisture from my windscreen.

Mile by mile the mist lifted and the sunshine came through to wash the white roadway ahead of me in bright autumn yellow. All around was russet and olive and sepia. The dead leaves swirled and swept over the road, and I could hear the keen, clear wind fluffing against the car window. I glanced at the white clouds against the blue sky and saw briefly their crawling shadows moving over the distant hills.

My face and body were still very sore.

I thought a lot about Scarlie. Why wasn't he there? Was the whole thing rigged specially for me? That didn't make sense. These two toughs were not armed or they would have pulled guns long before I reached the car. It was hardly likely that they would trap me like that just to beat me up as a lesson. No, sir—if Scarlie fixed that trap for the gang for me, they would have made a job of it—and got me out of the way for good.

I thought Scarlie meant to arrive. Somebody knew he would be meeting me. Or maybe somebody deduced he would be meeting

me. He was in the whisky gang and he fell out with them. Why? Money? Possibly they hadn't paid him enough.

I thought about Dick Lamont's last words to him, "You're nice and hot, Scarlie." And he *was*—hotter than hell at that very moment when he walked out of the restaurant. It could have been anyone. Louis, for instance. It could have been anyone from any pavement to any restaurant. He was probably being tailed all that day.

At least Scarlie established one thing. There *was* a gang, and it looked as if it might be highly organized. Who was organizing it?

Callingway? Big time. A whisky owner. My own client—at twenty a day, plus expenses. Where did Callingway shape up in all this? A client's a client, but they get all fangled up at times. I've seen it happen so often. They think they're smart in engaging a private dick to investigate crimes they've had a hand in. With some of them it's a kind of power-sozzle—like drinking more and more absinthe to see how far you can go before you die.

Was Callingway like that? You couldn't tell. He seemed O.K. But why the sudden departure for London? When I saw him at ten o'clock he had no intention of going away. Anyway, why had the cops a file on Callingway? Pollok could tell me that but he never would.

Another thing I remembered Pollok telling me—Kelso and his wife were on the "whisky fringe". What did he mean by that? What connection had they with the whisky business? Whether Callingway admitted it now or not—I saw him nod to Kelso in the hotel two hours before the killing. Callingway was a big whisky owner; Kelso was an advertising agent handling predominantly four whisky accounts. Anything there? I couldn't see it.

Graham owned the Scotch Dirk business. A queer guy, this Graham. He knew the Kelsos, too—quite well and quite openly—simply because Kelso was his agent. Simple? I wasn't so sure. Yet this whisky theft of his was quite genuine. No insurance, either.

Why was the Kelso marriage a cat-and-dog affair? Pollok said that that last meal they had was unusual because it was civil. Had they fought for business reasons—or just because they were man and wife?

Why the hell wouldn't Pollok *talk*!

Then I remembered a name—Farquhar. That was the name of

the guy who was now managing the Kelso agency. I reminded myself to see him when I got back to Glasgow.

Mine was the only car at the hotel door. I shut the door and walked slowly along the gravel drive. A keen breeze from the sea sizzled through the baring trees; the brilliant sunshine did nothing to take away the edge of chill. The fields beyond the little bridge had the gaunt, fearful complexion of approaching winter. Birds flew without sound above my head.

I went down the moss-edged terrace steps. Anderson was seated comfortably on the little cannon, the collar of his grey tweed coat turned up. He was doodling with his stick idly among the pebbles and two retriever dogs capered with the swirling leaves on the lawn.

He looked up, eyes screwed against the breeze and the sunshine.
"Morning, Mr. Daly."

I sat down beside him on the rounded barrel. "Is it still loaded?"

He grinned. "You should worry. I always think of you sitting on live ammo—one way or another."

I offered him a cigarette. "How're things?"

"Just taking a last breath before we shut ourselves in for the winter. You staying?"

I lit both our cigarettes under my shielding hand. "No, thanks. I want to get back to Glasgow tonight."

"To what do we owe the pleasure, etcetera?"

"To my long nose."

He looked at me, then remembered I was an investigator. "You mean—you're here on a case or something?"

"In a way." I moved some pebbles with my foot.

He said nothing but I knew he was watching my face as I channelled through the pebbles with my shoe. Then he said, "What kind of case?"

"Kelso."

"Kelso! Not at *this* stage! He was shot. The Fiscal gave that verdict. You heard him—you were there. Death by Misadventure."

I drew on my cigarette. "That's right. He was shot by accident. All right. What *I'm* interested in is what Kelso did when he was alive."

The furrows on Anderson's tanned forehead smoothed out as if in relief. "I see." His voice sounded happier. "Well, I don't think we'll be able to help you much there. He came from Glasgow, y'know. He was in advertising or something."

I kept looking at him.

He went on: "He came here once or twice—both of them did. I knew them for a year or two. Passing trade."

I said nothing. I still looked at him.

He was speaking a little faster now, as if to keep the talk going. "I think they first began coming up this way three years ago. They used to come in for a meal."

He stopped, looked at me, then went on doodling with his stick. I took my time. "Kelso came in here *before* lunch."

"Before lunch? Did he? I can't remember."

"Your barman remembers." I waited till that sank.

"Does he?" He frowned as if trying to remember. "Yes, I believe you're right—he *did* come in before lunch."

I kept quiet for a while. Then I decided to throw the dice for the lot. "Why didn't you tell the Fiscal *all* you knew about Kelso and his wife?"

He looked at me quickly. "What d'you mean? I told him all he wanted to know."

"But you didn't tell him anything he didn't know."

"Like what?"

I bluffed it right through to the knowing, twisted smile I gave him.

Anderson said: "Look, Daly—I run a hotel. You know what that means?"

"Sure," I said. "It means you're going to be out of business five hours after I phone my pal the chief crime man on the *Glasgow Evening Dispatch*. That's how long it'll take him to send up a bunch of his boys. You'll be blind for an hour after the flashlight-boys have gone."

"What're you talking about?" He looked scared.

"I mean I'll get your hotel headlined with a picture of it and a three-inch questionmark above the front door. I know enough already to make a very juicy story about Kelso."

He rose. "Come into my room."

I followed him with one hand in my coat pocket and my fingers crossed.

After he had poured the coffee and handed me my cup, Anderson sat back in his hide armchair. "All right. What d'you want to know about Kelso?"

I stirred my cup. "Don't let me ask. Just you tell me all you can—anything—everything—how he came here that day."

Anderson's voice was lower, more friendly. "But I don't see what you want to know. What're you after?"

I laid my coffee on the little walnut table. "Just you tell me the things you kept to yourself at the Fiscal's inquiry."

He moved uncomfortably. Then he put his cup on the floor and spoke quietly, nervously. "Well, I . . . I don't know how to put it."

"F'rinstance, he *was* here before lunch?"

"Ye-es. He was." He paused. "I saw him drive in, get out of his car and walk into the bar. He looked—steamed up about something."

"What time was this?"

"About noon. He had a few drinks, then he had a quick lunch and left here again within an hour."

"Where did he go?"

Anderson looked at the floor, picked up his cup and drank some coffee. "I don't know."

"Where *might* he go?"

He finished the coffee, looked at me over the rim of the cup and said, "You probably heard Mrs. Kelso say at the inquest that they had a bungalow near here—at Berriston."

"Yes. I heard her. Where's Berriston?"

"A mile north of here—on the little Sadler's road."

I kept my eyes on his face. "What kind of bungalow is it?"

"A timber place. Well made. They used it for odd holidays and week-ends."

I waited but Anderson said no more. He looked nervous and reached out for the coffee-pot. I stopped his arm and said: "Listen, Anderson. The longer you bottle this, the worse it'll be on you and your hotel. Glasgow police are snuffling about this Kelso killing and your hotel with an interest that would make you scream. I know. I've just left them back there. The file on your place is an inch deep already."

He licked his lips. "Is that right?"

"I'm telling you—straight. Get it out of your system—to me. I'm a private investigator and I'll probably get all the answers before the cops do. Now—sing, Mr. Anderson—loud and long—to *me*. I'll save you the headline treatment."

He clasped and unclasped his fingers. "Well, look, Daly—I'll have to trust you."

"I'll steer you clear of trouble. I promise."

He poured some more coffee. His hand shook slightly. "Kelso came in here, as I say, and had drinks and lunch. The barman tells me he swallowed four large gins one after the other. Then he flew out of the door, got into his car and I saw him drive up the Sadler's road."

"So he probably went to their bungalow."

"Right." Anderson breathed. "And when he came back an hour later he had Mrs. Kelso with him."

I said nothing for a time. I watched the thin line of smoke from my cigarette. Then I said: "If they were up at their bungalow, why did they take accommodation with you? They must have intended staying overnight."

"Yes, they did. I can understand that. The bungalow at this time of the year would probably be cold and damp—not being fired."

"Unless, of course, Mrs. Kelso was living up there."

"Yes," he said. "Unless . . ." He paused, then, "Incidentally, I went upstairs after they got in and I heard them quarrel."

"Quarrel? You sure?"

"Well, they certainly were bawling a bit."

I sat back. "It gets curioser. Shouting a bit." I thought about that one. "Did you hear anything?"

He smiled weakly. "I run a hotel, Mr. Daly. I moved on."

"Sure." I swallowed some coffee. "Kelso borrowed your fishing gear. Anything worth talking about there?"

He shrugged. "No. Just straightforward fly tackle—ten-foot split-cane rod, reel, line, casts, gaff—" He broke off and he lowered his eyebrows as if remembering something.

I waited.

He looked up at me, paused, then said: "There was a telephone call came through for Mrs. Kelso when I was out at the back giving Kelso his gear."

I sat up. "A call? How d'you know?"

"The receptionist told me later."

"Who called her?"

"Don't know. Somebody in Glasgow. A man. He asked the receptionist to get Mrs. Kelso if she were available, and to hurry because it was a trunk-call from Glasgow."

"Your receptionist remembers things."

He shrugged. "All of us recalled everything about the Kelsos that day." He sighed. "It was a day to remember. I even had the

police in Gilfillan telephone *me* in the morning. That started the day off."

"About Kelso?"

"No. About Mr. Callingway."

I looked at him. "Callingway? What'd they want?"

"Nothing. Just wanted to know if I had a booking for him. I said yes."

"I wonder why. D'you know Henry Callingway?"

He shrugged. "He's a customer. Comes up every few months. He's a big whisky man, isn't he? He started coming here over two years ago. I look after him well and he pays top for everything."

"I wonder if Callingway knew Kelso?" I watched Anderson's face carefully as I said this but his reaction meant nothing to me.

"No idea," he said.

I got up and the lines of worry started on Anderson's face all over again. He said, "You'll be sure——"

"Forget it. Keep sitting on these things and you're straight in trouble. You've told me them and you're at least half-clear if the case is reopened. I'm not a cop, but you've proved you had nothing to hide."

He came to the door with me. "Well—I hope you're right—if the case *is* reopened." He suddenly realized what he was saying and he stared at me. "You think it might be?"

"Could be."

We walked through the hallway. He said: "I hope it isn't. I've had enough."

"I haven't." I was about to turn away at the front door when I thought about something. "There's something you can do for me."

"What is it?" Anderson asked.

"That phone call—the one Mrs. Kelso got the night her husband was murdered. D'you think the local telephone people would be able to give you any information about it?"

He looked puzzled. "You mean—who it was who phoned her? I don't think they could—not now. They wouldn't know anyway."

"No, I don't mean that. D'you think they might know where the call came from?"

"But we know that. It was Glasgow——" He broke off and looked at me. "Or maybe you don't think that now."

I shrugged. "Ask them, anyway. You're a subscriber. They might tell you. They certainly wouldn't tell me."

"Well, I'll ask. But I don't think they'll be able to check that."

"They might. It's a small local telephone system and they probably keep records of some kind."

"I'll try."

I left him.

Baling the water out of the boat took me nearly fifteen minutes. When it was done I looked at my watch and saw it was two minutes to noon. I got into the boat, untied the rope from the little post and hoped I could remember how to row properly.

The first few strokes told me I had been spending too long smoking, drinking, driving too much. I managed the boat with more splash than seamanship. I had to pull the oars in slightly and let the boat glide smoothly under the little bridge. After that it was plainer sailing, even for me. The river was wide enough to allow me plenty of false strokes, and there was very little head-current.

It was one of those frosty, still days that look like late afternoon all day. By the time I had rowed round the first bend of the river I felt as if I were on a lost planet. The reeds were tall, motionless, grim. An occasional naked tree dangled its glistening limbs eerily among the hoar-white, dying vegetation. There was no sound but the ghostly, soft splash of my oars and my creaking rowlocks in a regular, slow rhythm. No bird sounded. All was silence as in a garden of death. The reeds were taller now—taller than any man—and they kept out more and more of the dull, yellow day. The tiny waves from my rowing rippled and lapped with oily, lonely sounds against the boggy banks on either side. There was no breath of wind. I stopped rowing and turned round to look ahead. The brown reeds, frost-whitened, stood quiet and still. The water reflected in a grey-green light the tall walls of rushes.

I could see the widening mirror where it spread out to form the pool—like a lake in a jungle of white and brown. I turned round and rowed steadily upstream towards the pool.

I reached it in a few minutes. I stopped rowing and let the boat drift stilly and silently as I looked all round the mirror of water. Over by some hanging vegetation that trailed bleakly in the river there was a sudden explosion of splashing, a flurried beating of wings—and two panicking ducks flew at speed on the surface upstream and into the mist.

I rowed over to the bank and let the boat nestle into a tiny

bay. Looking over the side, I could see the bottom of the river clearly—all sandy mud and waving fronds of dark-brown weeds. Holding on lightly to a projecting stone to steady the boat, I sat quite still and tried to imagine things. I looked across the sheer, smooth mirror and thought about Kelso, how he might have been fishing that night, how Seton was shooting duck up among those tall reeds, and how Kelso got the full charge from the gun at close quarters. I couldn't see it; it wouldn't picture.

Sitting in the stern and gazing down into the water, I very slowly glided the boat downstream by passing my hand on the bank from stone to stone, turf to turf, reeds to reeds. I thought about the skin divers who do something like this by looking through their goggles. I had covered quite a good stretch of river-bed before I saw it glinting among the mud in the bottom of the river.

It was a gun; there was no doubt about that. I could see the long barrel and even part of the fancily engraved butt. The mud and silt almost completely covered the breech. I stared at it for quite a long time before I sat up.

In spite of the country brogue shoes they were the liveliest pair of silk-stockinged ankles I had ever seen. And from my boat looking up to the bank I was certainly seeing them from the right angle. I looked further up to the hem of her green tweed coat.

"You found it then?" she said.

It was Mrs. Kelso.

I came out of the boat, tied it on to a dead tree and came up on the bank. "Yes," I said. "What a careless place to leave it."

She smiled—it was not a very warm one—and put her hands in the pockets of her thick coat. She was wearing a small hazel-brown felt hat.

I took out my cigarettes. "In a way, Mrs. Kelso, I'm disappointed it's you I've met here."

She accepted a cigarette. "Why? Who did you think might be here?"

"Whoever shot your husband is coming back for that."

She looked at the river pensively. I thought she looked really beautiful in a cool, madonna-like way. "You don't think I did it, then?"

I lit our cigarettes. "There's nothing to say you didn't. You went for a walk that night—just before he was killed."

She looked at me. "Do I look the type?"

"There is no type, Mrs. Kelso. People who kill do all kinds of

ordinary things—like having quarrels with their husbands before they do it. And taking telephone calls from men without saying anything about it. Things like that."

She looked at her cigarette, then closed up the neck of her coat.
"Perhaps we should talk somewhere."

I adjusted my hat. "Yes, I'd be very pleased. Where?"

"I put a fire on in the bungalow. Would that do?"

"Are you here alone?"

"Yes." She made for the dry ground among the reeds.

I shrugged. "Lead on. I can't think of anything better."

I followed her through the reeds. Later I said, "I'm taking your word that there *is* a way out of this jungle."

She called back: "It's quite dry ground from now on. It looks worse than it is."

It was more like a luxurious little chalet than a bungalow—made of dark-stained pinewood with a roof of red tiles. The windows—unlike most in the Scottish Highlands—were big, wide, and the warm glow from the fire inside looked cheerful and kindly as we walked up the little hill. There was an asphalt driveway leading to the bungalow from a nearby stone road on the other side.

She opened the door with a small key. "Put your coat and hat in the hall here."

The room was done in a theme of deep crimson, light grey-green and the dark, stained pinewood of the walls. The effect of richness was here without any of its show. There was nothing very expensive in the place as far as I could see, but there *was* the result of careful buying and excellent taste. Over by the window, opposite the fireplace, was a large bookcase. Beside this, to the right, a radiogram with a row of discs. The table in the centre of the floor was plain, well-polished mahogany. The chair on which I sat was big, roomy, sensible.

Mrs. Kelso opened the doors of a small sideboard and fetched a bottle and two glasses. Her blue-black hair shone in the fire-light.

"Whisky or sherry?"

"Whisky, please."

She poured mine large. She had a sherry and sat down. "You were saying, Mr. Daly?"

I swallowed some whisky. "I was asking, Mrs. Kelso."

She smiled. "All right. Ask."

"You been staying here long?"

"Altogether—or just this trip?"

"This trip."

She sipped her sherry. "Since Saturday morning."

"Alone?"

She nodded. "What's odd about that?"

I couldn't think of a reason and I told her so. Then I said, "Why did you leave that gun in the river after you found it?"

"For the same reasons as you did."

"I'm an investigator. I have reasons for that kind of thing."

She shrugged. "You think somebody'll come back for it? So do I—either by the way you did or through the reeds past this cottage."

"That's right. Somebody will—yet."

She paused to accept my light to her cigarette. I noticed her fingernails matched the deep crimson carpet. She said, "You don't believe it was an accident then, Mr. Daly?"

"That this young fellow Seton killed your husband? No." I looked at her. "Do you?"

She held her glass and looked thoughtfully into the fire. "No. I don't. Not now. Seeing that gun's made me sure of that now."

I ran my finger idly round the rim of my cigarette packet. "Do you think you know who it was?"

Her greeny eyes came up to look straight at mine. "I haven't an idea in the world." She paused. "Have you?"

"No," I said. "I don't know." I drew on my cigarette. "I can't even think of any reason why I should be interested. It's none of my business. Your husband was shot. The law says it was an accident. That is not the case I'm investigating—you see that, don't you, Mrs. Kelso?"

"Yes," she said. "I do see that. What are you investigating, if I may ask?"

"I—heft. Of things. From a big company."

She smiled. I noticed her teeth were very white and regular. "You explain things very thoroughly. Never mind. And do your—investigations—take you back up to these parts?"

"No. I came up here specially to take another look at the place."

"Because of—my husband's death?"

I looked at my cigarette. "Yes—and for some other reasons that interested me." I paused. Tell me, Mrs. Kelso—may I ask who phoned you that night—while your husband was fishing?"

She frowned in puzzlement. Her smooth, creamy forehead

puckered slightly. "Phoned me? Yes—it was the agency in Glasgow. You forget even when my husband was alive I was an active director. I handle quite a few smaller accounts."

"They phoned you so late?"

"Yes—they were working on a job. They wanted a decision on a small point." She rose. "Whisky?"

I handed my glass. "Thanks. How long are you staying here, Mrs. Kelso?"

She hesitated. "Till this evening. I'm leaving after four."

"You found out all you wanted to know?" I took the filled whisky glass.

She sat down. "I don't know. It's like—just waiting—for something and you're not quite sure what it is." For a moment she looked as if she might suddenly cry. She shrugged and the tranquil smoothness was on her face again. "It was just a notion, that was all."

"But the notion *did* show you a gun."

"Yes. That was the gun that murdered my husband. I've got no doubt about that now."

I drank some whisky. "D'you want it?"

She thought. "If I take it out of the river, what do I do with it?"

I shrugged. "Give it to the law."

"And then?"

"They'll reopen the case. Fresh evidence."

She looked at me. "Would that gain me anything?"

"It might tell you who murdered him."

"And if I leave it there—on the chance that somebody comes back for it?"

"You'll *know* who murdered him—if you get him."

She thought for a moment. "What would you suggest I do?"

"Get down to Gilfillan police station and tell them what you found. They'll leave it there and put a man on watching the spot."

"Yes," she said, looking out at the misty afternoon twilight. "That would be the sensible thing."

I rose. "You needn't say you met me. I'll get that boat back to the hotel."

She came to the door. "It *might* be a coincidence."

I smiled. "That's right. It might be. But if that gun's not a Cumberland Number Six it's high time I was a hotel dick with a pension."

"Anyway, I'll report it to the police." She smiled tiredly. "That

should get the idea out of *your* head that I had anything to do with the murder."

I put one hand on the door-frame. "Mrs. Kelso, I leave you with this thought. Whoever put that gun there will come back for it. That's almost a certainty. So far I've only had evidence of one person who's been at the river since your husband's death."

"Who?"

"You." I put on my hat. "Good day."

By the time I had manoeuvred the little boat back into its mooring below the bridge it was after three o'clock. The mist was coming down and the hotel and its grounds looked eerie in the dull yellow memory of the day's earlier sunshine. The little cannon by the terrace glistened wetly as I passed. One of the dogs started to bark, its lonely sound echoing back over the still, mist-sodden lawns to the house.

I met Anderson in the bar. We were alone.

"I thought you'd gone," he said.

I grinned. "You hoped."

"Well," he shrugged. "What'll you have?" He went round to the business side of the little counter.

"Haggis juice. I should take it by injection. It's losing its effect on me since I came to Scotland."

He poured two blunkers. "Shut the door," he said.

I closed the door of the bar and returned to the high stool.

Anderson sipped his whisky and spoke quietly. "I got on to the telephone people. The call to Mrs. Kelso didn't come from Glasgow."

I waited.

He went on, "It was made from a place called Logan Bridge."

"Where's that?"

"Ten miles from here—going north-west towards Fort William and Oban."

I swallowed some whisky. "Are they sure?"

"Certain. I got the surprise of my life when they told me. It was the head supervisor. She called me back in fifteen minutes."

"I *felt* they'd have a record of it somewhere in a small place like this."

Anderson looked cautiously towards the door. "She told me something else. This was the *second* inquiry she'd had about that call."

"Who made the other one?"

"Well, she asked me if we were the same people who'd been phoning earlier this morning about that call. So I didn't say yes or no till I found out who had been making the earlier query. It was a woman. That's all I could learn."

I lit a cigarette. "A woman." I grinned.

"Who would that be?" he asked.

"I wonder," I said and drank some whisky. I looked into my glass for a time, then said: "Logan Bridge. What kind of place is it? Anything there?"

"Nothing much. Two or three houses, a church, a small hotel called the—er—the Bruce, I believe. Nothing else. Couple of farms nearby. I don't think there's even a call-box."

"Hotel seems the likely place, then." I made to go. "Thanks for the drink. Don't forget what I said. Ears open—mouth shut. I'll be phoning you soon."

"You going back to Glasgow?"

"No—on to Fort William. To Henry Callingway's whisky distillery."

"Don't get drunk. G'-bye."

CHAPTER SEVEN

MANY a better man than I must surely have stopped at Logan Bridge. I couldn't think why—but there *was* a hotel.

The place sprawled. There were half a dozen small, cottage-type houses tucked under the mass of a mountain-side, a small church that seemed to be simply one of its own graveyard stones, a little house-cum-shop that looked a dressed-up piece of nonsense bedecked with the enamel signs of the cigarette and lemonade manufacturers. And there was the hotel—a small, dreary, uninviting place of two stories and a pebbled area round its door.

Logan Bridge was Nowhere Bridge. It belonged neither to the Scottish Highlands nor to a Yukon boom settlement. Somewhere between.

There are some places like that in the Highlands—little villages and groups of houses that don't seem to have the spirit to strike a chord of anything. They happen. In these places no kilted warrior ever shed his Celtic blood for his clan's honour. No clan

ever came within a claymore's strike of those dreary corners of the hills. Bonnie Prince Charlie never even stayed an hour within a mile of the place. Robert Burns never visited them; Rob Roy never stole cattle from them. Sir Walter Scott never even mentioned them.

Fortunately, the Highlands have few of these melancholy little settlements with the bleary-eyed houses and rotting corrugated iron rusting on spare grounds. But they are there. And Logan Bridge was one of them.

I walked along the pebbled front of the hotel and into the doorway between two hideous, porcelain plant-bowls that looked like giant chamber-pots. Perhaps they were. I had to ring the bell.

After a few minutes a shadow appeared behind the glass door which had a design of the Holy Mountain of Japan. The door opened and a fuzzy-haired, middle-aged woman stared at me.

"Yes?"

I took off my hat. "Is this the hotel?"

She thought about that one. Then her eyes brightened. "Yes. The hotel."

"Can I come in?"

She made a great fuss of opening the door and straightening her apron in the one operation. She managed to open her apron (which fell to the floor) and unstraighten the door.

I decided to ignore the argument, and I went in.

She closed the door, picked up her apron and said wheezily, "Did you want to stay?"

"No, thanks. I just wanted to have a drink."

She stared—not with any hostility—but in utter, complete bewilderment.

"A drink," I said. "Perhaps a glass of beer."

She tried to smile, gave up, and shouted down the brown-and-green hall, "Agnes!" then continued to keep her eyes on my face in case I might run away with the steel-engraved picture of a Highland bull hung on the wall beside us.

Agnes was older, fuzzier, with more apron and less neck. She appeared in the darkened oblong of an entrance that might, for all I know, have led to the furnaces of hell. She said nothing.

"Agnes—the gentleman wants a glass of beer."

No answer.

"Beer, Agnes; we have some . . . in the cupboard." Then to me, she said, "Will you—just go in there, sir?" She indicated a

walnut-stained door to the right of the hall. I almost ran to open it.

The sitting-room was drearier than the hall. In fact, there was a thought in favour of transposing them. Heavy wine brocade curtains at the window provided a deadly backdrop to a stuffed wildcat that glared at me from within a glass case. On the floor, on the window-ledges, round the room, were pots of green plants that seemed to enjoy a more virile life-growth than the owners of the house. The wallpaper had a pointless pattern of squares within circles within diamonds and a scheme of apple-greens, smoky yellows and faded blues. The wide, old-fashioned mantelpiece held everything from two china pekingese dogs to a hand-sewn cushion with the words "A present from Great Yarmouth 1923" embossed on it. I sat on a horsehair sofa.

Agnes came in with my beer in a lager glass on a wooden tray which she laid on a lime-green cane-woven chair. She waited.

"Thanks," I said.

She still waited. Then she said, "That'll be one and eightpence."

I paid her and she pattered out like an Airedale dog that carries a newspaper in its teeth.

The beer was flat. I left it. I waited five minutes and rose. I went out of the chamber of the wildcat and waited in the hall, looking around. The hotel register lay on a little sloping wall-desk and I went over to it till I turned to the page of the previous Wednesday. It was blank.

Fuzzy-Wuzzy came on the scene then. She said, "Well now, you're going?" She seemed glad.

"Yes," I said. I hesitated. "I was wondering if there was a telephone call-box in the village."

She stared at me. "A call-box!"

"Yes," I said. "With a telephone inside."

She looked thoughtfully at my shoulder and shook her head. "No-o. Not here." Her face brightened. "But we have a phone."

"No, that's not what I want. Tell me, Mrs. . . ."

"Miss—Colquohon."

"Yes. Tell me, are there many telephones around here?"

The worried, puzzled look came across her eyes again. Obviously she thought me unhinged. "Telephones? Well, there's . . . the minister has one. And I know there's one in the shepherd's house now—a mile down the road. And . . . let's see . . . there's one at Logan Estate."

"Where's that?"

"Six miles on."

"Who stays there?"

She gave a bleak smile. "Logan Estate? Oh, well now, that's the laird's estate. I'm not sure who's staying there just now. Sir Henry has so many guests and folk that rent it from time to time." She turned towards the Black Hole. "Agnes! Who's at the estate these days?"

There were some human noises from Beyond. Miss Colquohon translated for me. "Agnes isn't sure. A Colonel somebody has it."

I thanked her and said good night. She watched me as I had a last, fond, parting glance at the Holy Mountain of Japan.

The day was getting towards its end when I reached Fort William. All along the narrow main street shops were bustling and hurrying to serve the last customers; others already had their shutters or blinds over the windows. Cars, vans and trucks crawled close together in the grey dusk. Top-coated men and women scurried along, eyes red, faces flushed with the whirling, cold wind that blew from the white-capped mountains beyond the town end.

I found Callingway's distillery down a quiet, smooth side-street that seemed sheltered from the wind. It looked like a small, clean, whitewashed factory. The main entrance-way was truck-wide and the name set in a curved facia-board above the gate said: "Henry J. Callingway & Co., Ltd., Distillers of Scotch Whisky."

I left my car outside and walked into the smooth, concreted driveway. A man was rolling barrels from a truck down an improvised ramp to a loading-bay in the far corner. I called, "Where can I find Mr. Maitles?"

He looked round, sat tiredly on one of the barrels and pointed to a side door. "In there, mister."

I opened the door and walked into an old-fashioned, highly polished, brass-and-mahogany office which had a counter for visitors. One old man with a tweed cap on was sitting in a leather-covered chair by the window reading a newspaper. He looked up and screwed his face at me by way of query.

"Mr. Maitles in?"

He rose. "Mr. Maitles." He panted as he folded his paper and straightened his jacket. "Mr. Maitles. Yes. Yes, sir." He puffed

and tottered through a doorway. I waited. I thought that visitors must be few; he hadn't asked my name.

Two minutes later he came back, still panting. "Through here, sir—right through this way."

I followed him through the door, along a short, rubber-floored passage to another door. There, with some gasping, rheumy mumbles, he left me.

I knocked on the door and walked in. A grey-haired, short, tubby man got up from his desk and held out his hand. "Mr. Daly?"

I shook hands. "That's right."

"I'm Maitles."

Mavis Sangster sat where she was and smiled. "You're late, Mr. Daly. You were expected two hours ago."

I hung my hat on a peg. "That wasn't nice of me. Tell your editor I'll try better next time."

Maitles said, "Sit down, Mr. Daly. You like a dram?"

I sat down. "I would."

He opened a drawer of his desk, took out a bottle and two glasses which he filled. "Miss Sangster?"

She shook her head.

I said, "Have one, Mavis. Maybe you'll need it by the time you tell me why you're here."

Maitles pushed my full glass over. "Now, before we go any farther, Mr. Daly—it's knocking-off time and if you want to see anybody, I'd better get them now."

"Yes, I do. The driver of the truck."

He knocked back his dram in one toss, and rose. "I thought you might." He fetched his watch from his vest pocket and peered at it. "I'll just get'm." He went out, smacking the flavour of the dram from his lips.

For a time I said nothing. I sipped the whisky, put the glass on the desk.

Mavis said, "Dick sends his regards."

"That's nice."

Pause.

"He sent me to see you."

"That's nice, too."

Pause. More whisky.

"I got the ten-thirty train from Glasgow this morning. I knew you'd be here some time in the late afternoon."

"Did you?"

The oatmeal-shade tweed coat she wore suited her. It had a thick fur collar and cuffs. Her hat was small, nigger-brown, and she wore it well to the back of her head. Her hair was certainly worth the revelation.

She said, "Look—don't look so mad about this. You know the Chief won't allow Dick an hour of a reporter's time on the whisky-stealing stories. Well, he feels you're on to something and he asked me if I would follow you up and let him know what's what."

I sighed. "Mavis Sangster, you're a nice girl. Dick's a nice guy. You work for a nice paper. Why don't you just go home and leave me to get on with this job? I can't think of any wronger time than this for Dick to start working up headlines. There *is* no story—no nothin'. Please—go home."

"No." She fetched her cigarette-case from her bag.

I drained my whisky glass. "That was me asking you. Now I'm telling you. Go home."

"Cigarette?" She held out the case.

I took one. "How did Maitles know I was coming?"

"I told him."

I lit our cigarettes. "For such a pretty nose, it pokes too much."

She exhaled smoke and sat back. "Now you listen to me, Dragnet Daly. Maybe Dick's a little dull of hearing, but I don't think he heard any of the mind-your-own-business stuff the day you came up to the office. Or when I dug out a ton of cuttings for you. Or when he put Scarlie on to you. You started this. He didn't. Nor did I."

I thought about that salvo. It hurt. But it was worth a grin. "Okay. I'll give you that—and Dick." I flicked some ash into the ash-tray. "But you have all the chips. Any dope you give me goes right between my ears and stays there. Anything I give you might hit me tomorrow morning in headlines over my cornflakes. And that, sweet one, is my worry. One false step or tip-off to the wrong people could wreck the whole investigation at this stage. Dick knows that."

She crossed her legs. "He's not insane. He knows that—so do I. But this story's going to break one day soon—and he just doesn't want to be publishing the memoirs. He wants to get in on the basement floor. He can't put reporting staff on to it. Ergo—me. Discreet, helpful, quiet, and quite, quite confidential."

I found myself looking at the little hollow part of her throat. She had a very peach-and-creamy skin. "Very nice," I said, "Now what do you do?"

She smiled. "Just sit here and listen to you grilling this driver." She held up her neat hands. "Look—no notebook."

I sighed. "I should have gone in for uranium mining."

The door opened and Maitles returned. Behind him was a man in soiled navy-blue suit and a skipped mariner-type cap which he took off as he closed the door.

Maitles said, "This is McPhie, the driver. I told him you'd want a word with him, Mr. Daly. Sit down, McPhie." Maitles sat down behind his own desk.

McPhie took a chair and nodded to me amiably. He was a short, burly man about forty-five. He was balding slightly and his front teeth were badly decayed. His face was roughly shaped and his high-bridged nose ruddy. His eyes were very blue and small.

I said, "Just tell me what happened that day, McPhie."

He fingered his cap, coughed hoarsely, and spoke in a West Highland lilting tone.

"Well now, I got most of the barrels loaded up about five o'clock on the Monday and left the lorry out there in the bay till the morning. I got in in the morning about eight and finished off the loading and the fixing. That took me up to dinner-time—about half past twelve. Then I had a bite to eat and got me papers from the office here and got on the way."

"Which road did you take?"

"The only one there is—for lorries that size, anyway—the main road south through Glencoe and then down into Crianlarich."

"Okay—go on."

"I got through Glencoe and I was going over the moors towards Sannicher—and it's a wild, lonely road that one—when I sees ahead of me a motor-car across the middle of the road with the bonnet-cover up and two men tinkering with the engine."

"D'you remember what kind of car?"

"Yes, indeed. I think it was a Cromway—you know, the older kind with the curved back sloping down."

"Colour?"

"Black, it was. Anyway, I drew up and shouted out of the cab window, askin' them what was wrong. One of the men was

wearing sun-glasses and I thought this was a funny thing to be wearin' so late on in the year. And he wore a leather jacket—no coat. Anyway, it was him that answered me and he asked me if I could give them a hand. Now, I'm no mechanic but I got down and went over to the car—and that's the last thing I remember."

"Why? What happened?"

He rubbed the back of his head. "Well, something hit me and it's all I know. When I woke up I was lying on a roadside miles away—in fact, I was nearly fifteen miles away—at a place called Ben Voir. I got to me feet and walked along the road for about a mile till I reached a house. And I telephones Mr. Maitles here and he sends a car for me."

I leaned back and took one of Maitles' cigarettes. I lit it and drew for a while, thinking. Then I said:

"Did you see the *other* man?"

"Only his back. He was bent down over the engine."

"Did you see any other vehicle—another lorry, for instance?"

"No. Mind you, there *could* have been one behind that hill on the moor. But I couldn't see any."

Maitles said, "You've probably heard the rest from Mr. Calling-way—or read it in the papers, Mr. Daly. Our truck was found twenty miles away at a lonely place called Corvernoch Wood. That's the back o' nowhere."

"And it was empty."

"Not a barrel on it."

I drew in some more cigarette fumes and thought more. Maitles seemed to feel the silence and said, "Will you need McPhie any longer, Mr. Daly?"

"Yes—a little longer. Tell me, Mr. Maitles—did you have any visitors to the distillery either that day or the day before?"

He frowned, trying to recollect. "Only one, that I can remember. A chap called Livingstone—a photographer."

I sat up. "What did he look like?"

It was McPhie who said, "Well, he was a big man—broad, with a moustache—"

"Did you see him?" I asked.

Maitles said, "Well, we all saw him. He came round taking photographs of the place and the people. For some article or other in one of the weekly magazines. He did quite a lot of that kind of thing—showed us some of his articles in magazines."

I kept my eyes on McPhie. "Was he quite a pleasant type?"

"Oh, pleasant enough; big man."

I leaned back and let a pause develop before I said, "Well, I think that's all we'll need to ask you, McPhie."

He got up as if relieved. "Right, sir. I'll be getting along."

I rose. "I'll walk out with you to the gate. There was something else I wanted to ask you—it's gone out of my mind for the minute." I turned to Maitles. "I'll be back in five minutes."

When we were out in the loading-area, I grasped McPhie's arm and said quietly, "Listen, McPhie. This man Livingstone—where did you see him?"

His small blue eyes looked all over the place. "Here. He spoke to most of us. He took one or two pictures."

"Where did you see him?"

He shrugged. "He was in the distillery for nearly two hours——"

"Where did you see him?"

"I've told you, I——"

"You won't lose your job. But I've got to know. This is for *me*. Where did you see him?"

He pulled his chin, worked his mouth nervously. "I—I was talking to him that night at the McNab—in the bar."

"And you told him you were going south next day with a load?"

His face was pathetic. "Yes, I did, but we don't keep these things——"

"I'm not blaming you. You're not in the Secret Service. I just want to *know*, that's all."

He sighed slightly with relief. "Well, there it is. I couldn't say anything about it. I had the feeling I should've kept my mouth shut to strangers—specially with all these whisky hold-ups we've been having lately."

"Where's the McNab?"

"It's the hotel at the north end of the town. I met'm in the bar that night. When I went in for one on my road home."

"You told him you usually did that?"

"Yes." He looked surprised. "I did. Up there." He pointed to the loading bay. "That's what made me think about it all afterwards——"

"Forget it. Get it out of your mind."

"D'you think he might've been one of them?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. But you can forget it now. I just wanted to get it straight."

"You won't . . ." He nodded to the office.

I shook my head. "It's between you and me."

Maitles was playing the you-young-city-folk-are-always-dashing-about part to Mavis when I returned. He was sitting back in his chair displaying much vest and gold watch-chain.

"Well now," he said when I came in, "anybody else you want to see, Mr. Daly?"

"No, thanks. I think I'll get along."

"You staying overnight?"

Mavis said, "I am. I've no car. I came up by train."

I put on my hat and grinned. "Have a nice sleep."

She stared at me. "You're not going back tonight, are you?"

"That's right. Tonight. G'night, Mr. Maitles. Thanks for everything."

When we reached my car I held the door open for her. She said, "Where are we going?"

"To have dinner."

"Where?"

"A place called the McNab Hotel—at the other end of the town."

She sighed. "Thank goodness. That's where I've booked in. My bag's there."

Crawling along the main street—now dark and very sparsely populated—I caught the drift of Mavis's perfume. It was very nice.

She said, "Why're you going back tonight?"

"I've no toothbrush."

"You're mad. It's eighty miles—in the dark."

I said nothing.

"And . . ." she said, "if I go back to Dick Lamont and tell him I stayed and let you go back to Glasgow, he'll send me back to Advertising tomorrow."

"You should've stayed in Advertising, Mavis. That's where all the good-looking girls are."

She sighed. There was a pause before she said firmly, "Are you or aren't you going back to Glasgow tonight?"

"I am."

"Then you're taking me with you."

I grinned. "A pleasure, Mavis Sangster."

Dinner was a very pleasant business. There was Mavis on one side of the table and here was I on the other. The green dress she wore seemed to characterize her brown-gold hair, which

was cut short. Somehow she looked like all the most attractive Peter Pans I had seen for years in the Sunday papers. Her face was oval, dimpled, bright as if illumined through the peach-and-cream complexion. Her eyes were a sparkling hazel.

The McNab was a very typical, good-cheer Highland hotel that had caught up with today's standards in light fittings and intelligent *décor*. It was warm, pinkish and glittered in the right places—especially around the cutlery and table-glass. There were half a dozen other diners who could have been anything between a salesman for wood-cutting machinery to a lonely dowager who was a regular.

We talked about everything. By the time we had reached the sweet course I was beginning to think Dick's idea wasn't so bad. Mavis, no doubt, was thinking I had blood among the alcohol somewhere.

I said, "We should do this often."

She looked up from her fruit. "I know *that*. The trouble with private eyes and cops and newspaper-men is that when they *do* anything pleasant or normal or civilized once in a while, they think it's cute and that they should do it more often. They forget that normal people do it all the time."

"What? Dine with pretty girls?"

She shrugged. "Yes—that, and a lot of other things. Like playing golf or going to the cinema or visiting Aunt Maisie."

"I haven't got an Aunt Maisie."

"It would surprise me if you had *any* relatives."

I grinned. "I chose the wrong wine."

She smiled suddenly, spontaneously. "I'm sorry. It's the newspaper. I've been wanting to say it for a long time to somebody."

"Why me?"

She laughed. "I don't know. You fitted."

"Because I was tough with you today?"

"Maybe." She shrugged. "Maybe you *do* have an Aunt Maisie."

"For you, Mavis Sangster, I would find one."

She laid down her spoon and touched her lips with the napkin. "Seriously, though, do you want to tell me anything about the whisky stealing?"

I played with the salt-cellar. "Now?"

"Why not? You know Dick's got to have someone in on it at this stage. He chose me."

I sighed. "It's too. . ." I shrugged. "Look, Mavis, I don't know

how to put this. I'm grateful to Dick—don't think I'm not. He's an old pal and I know he'd understand this situation. But what do I tell you? And what might you do with it—even innocently?"

"Nothing. Honest. Dick wouldn't let you down. But he's still sore at the Old Man for shutting down on him when he was investigating the racket himself. And I think he wants to adjust the balance when the story *does* break—he wants to be a hundred editions ahead of even the nationals."

"How d'you know a story *will* break?"

She smiled. "Dick *knows* one will. He says so—because *you're* on it." She paused. "Does that make up for my insulting you?"

I grinned. "It'll do. Okay—I'll go so far with you. Ask the questions."

The waiter cleared away our plates and I ordered coffee. When he had gone, she said, "Well, first, have you any idea who's taking the whisky?"

"Yes. That's one."

She raised an eyebrow. "Not like a TV Panel Game—please! Two—who?"

"I can't say. Far too early. It's a gang—led by somebody with brains."

"Any suspicions?"

"Plenty." I shrugged. "But I'm miles off getting reasonable evidence. What's next?"

"What were you saying to McPhie at the gate when you went out with him?"

"Getting from him the truth—what he didn't want to say in front of Maitles in case he lost his job. He blabbed about taking a load of whisky south to a stranger."

"Who was the stranger?"

"Scarlie."

She sipped her coffee. "That all fits. He did say he came down from—where was it?"

"Callendar. Forty miles from here. I've checked on dates and it means he was at Callendar last Friday when Graham's whisky was stolen from Inveraray."

"What does that mean?"

I leaned forward. "It means, Mavis, that there was something about the stealing of Graham's whisky that was different from this hold-up of Callingway's stuff. Things didn't go right."

"Maybe he didn't get his cut?"

"Maybe he wasn't in on it at all. Graham's distillery's a long, long way from Callendar—over a hundred miles."

"That would account for him being sore."

"Correct," I said. "Now watch. He came south, saw some of the gang in Glasgow, had a helluva row and decided to cash in on his information. He contacted Dick, who put him on to me."

"Then he disappeared."

"He got scared. Obviously. He felt the hot breath on his neck and blew out fast. Now you see why I came here. Ever since I started this investigation I've had plenty of background information, plenty of facts, plenty of suspicious noises in the dark. But the only reasonable lead I've had to anything worth while so far is six foot of slob called Scarlie. I had him—and I lost him. Now I'm tailing him—backwards."

Mavis took one of my cigarettes. "Let me get this clear—Scarlle spoke to McPhie the night before the whisky went south?"

"Yes. And Scarlie must have passed that information to somebody—fast." I lit her cigarette. "How?"

"Telephone."

I inhaled cigarette smoke. "Right. Where?"

"Probably he used a phone near where he met McPhie. Where did he meet McPhie?"

I blew out smoke and fanned it. "He met McPhie in the bar of a hotel called the McNab."

She stared, her cup half-way to her lips. "Here?"

"Here." I finished my coffee and threw my napkin on the table. "You ready to go?"

She stubbed out her cigarette. "I'm frantic." She rose. "I'll get my bag from the porter."

"I'll see you in the hall in five minutes."

She went out while I paid the bill.

The McNab Hotel was owned and managed by a woman who looked as if she could comfortably manage the United States Sixth Fleet. She was fiftyish, plump, with neat, frizzy hair that was tinged henna. She wore rimless glasses through which her grey eyes looked, saw, conquered.

At first, she was suspicious. "Livingstone? Well, I couldn't say from memory. We get so many people in here. A photographer? Well. . ." She shrugged. "I don't suppose they look different from anybody else, do they?" She fingered her thin strand of crystal beads as if that was that.

"Everybody registers?" I asked.

"Everybody. I insist on it. The book's over there on the desk. Would you like to have a look while I see to this lady and gentleman?" She turned to attend to an arriving couple.

I went over to the reception desk and slowly read through the hotel register. It wasn't a very busy register—maybe a dozen people in a week entered. I turned to the page for Monday, 20th September, and there it was—Bernard Livingstone, address given as 18 Drumshead Avenue, Edinburgh; Nationality: British; Room 20. All probably fake except the nationality. No doubt he would have entered "Siamese" if he thought he could have got away with it.

I shut the book as Mavis came through the hall wearing her coat and hat, and carrying a small travelling valise.

She said quietly, "Any luck?"

"Loads. He registered."

"They'd probably insist. They're fussy."

I went over to the matriarch of the McNab who, by this time, had cleared the visiting couple and was sorting out some mail on the post table.

"I got what I wanted, thanks."

She turned round. "Did you? Good."

"I'm afraid that's not all I'd like to know about him."

At once she became cautious. "Oh?" Her voice dropped. "This isn't a police business, is it?"

I smiled. "No, no—nothing like that. This Mr. Livingstone's my brother, that's all. He's—well, one of the black sheep—and I'm trying to trace him for Mother's sake. You know—she's getting on a bit—and I heard he'd been up here on that date. We got a phone call from here—at least I think it was from here, and he rang off without telling us much. Since then, Mother's been in a terrible state. You see, we haven't seen him for twenty years."

Her face looked relieved. She even smiled faintly. "I see. Well, I know how it is with these wanderers. I'm sorry for your mother—being left in doubt like that. What else was it you wanted to know?"

"About that phone call. Could you tell me if he made it from here?"

She thought about that one. "Well, if the call was charged to his room, we'd have a record of it." She walked over past Mavis to the reception desk. "Flora!"

A slender girl with straight, brown hair appeared. "Yes, Mrs. Cameron?"

"Flora, let me see the telephone account book."

Flora fetched a medium-sized, black ledger. Mrs. Cameron flicked over the pages with her tubby fingers until she stopped at a certain page.

I craned my neck over her shoulder so far I thought I might bite the beads. I followed her finger down the columns till it stopped at an entry:

"Room 20. Livingstone. Glasgow Park 8625. 17 minutes. A.D.C. 14/3d."

She turned round as I left the beads in the nick of time. "Yes, here it is. He telephoned from his room to Glasgow." She read the number. "Park 8625. Was that it?"

"That's it," I said loudly. "Park 8625. My sister took the call."

Mrs. Cameron closed the ledger. "Well, there you are. I hope that helps."

"It does, Mrs. Cameron, believe me. Mother'll be relieved I've got a trace of him anyway. Thank you very much."

She smiled. "Not at all. A pleasure."

"Good night." I collected Mavis as she was putting away her little notebook.

Out in the street, I said, "You got it?"

"Yes, I made a note."

There was moonlight. There was Mavis. There was eighty miles of both to Glasgow.

It was past midnight when I was driving the car quietly along Great Western Boulevard. The large amber street lights flooded the wide roadway with shadowless colour. I could see them ahead for miles till they disappeared like tiny stars into the city.

I drew in to the kerb and stopped the car. She was still asleep, her head still resting on my shoulder, her body curled into the warmth of my coat.

I waited till she opened her eyes. I felt her stirring, but she didn't move from my shoulder. She said dreamily: "Wha's wrong, Ken? Where are we?"

I grinned. "Glasgow."

She yawned and nestled into my coat again, closing her eyes. "Mh."

I said, "It's a big city."

"Mh."

"Something you didn't tell me."

"Mh?"

"Mavis."

"Mh?"

"Where d'you stay?"

She stirred and sat up. Her voice was quite awake now. "Stay?"

"Live. Eat. Sleep. Brush your teeth."

She smiled. "Eighty-six, Granville Gardens."

"Where's that?"

"West."

CHAPTER EIGHT

I PRESSED Button "A" as the voice said: "Good morning. Kelso Advertising."

"Morning. Could I speak to Mrs. Kelso, please?"

"Mrs. Kelso? I'm sorry she's not in town today."

I said: "That's a pity. Is Mr. Farquhar in?"

"Yes, he's in. Who's calling?"

"He won't know me. Could I speak to him?"

"Hold on."

I waited. There was the sound of telephone connection, then an English-accent voice, "Farquhar here."

"Morning, Mr. Farquhar. I'm phoning from a call-box in Sangrove Street—quite near your office. Could I come and see you?"

Pause. "Well, I . . . What about, Mr. . . . ?"

"It's a personal business, Mr. Farquhar. Something I wouldn't like to talk about on the phone. I won't take up much of your time."

Pause. "Mh. Well, I'm clear this morning. Could you come now?"

"Right away. I'll be with you in five minutes. I'll give the name of Garvie." I hung up.

Walking along Sangrove Street and into Ellis Road, I had the same feeling as someone who has just put his month's salary on a horse. Anything on earth could happen to this one. It was the longest shot I'd taken since I started this case. It could misfire in so many ways. Margo Kelso may hear of it; she may even return

while I am still talking to Farquhar. Other people may learn of me visiting this advertising agency; they may get rough. Yet the most alarming way in which it could misfire was simply if it were a useless, unfruitful visit. I may be wasting my time.

Every plain-clothes cop or private investigator will tell you that there is a place and a time for leading a bull straight into the china shop and setting it loose. Almost every major case reaches a stage when it clams, when the people investigating it seem to learn so much and then wait through hours and days of dreary, barren silence. They get so far—and then the whole investigation sets solid on them. This is the period when the newspapermen take the case off the headlines and report it on page two with phrases like "The police are still hunting for more clues", or "No new fresh developments have taken place". The second-last chapter in those dead cases is usually reported as "No further evidence". Next day the case is not reported at all.

In a way, digging for clues in an investigation is like coal-mining. There comes a time when the miners can't find any more coal, or can't get at it with their tools. That's the time to call in the shot-blasters. They fire a section, there is an explosion—and the miners can get busy again digging out the broken-up coal.

I was now about to go in with some explosives.

The agency was a quiet-looking set of offices in a quiet-looking street. I took the elevator to the fifth floor and walked down a rubber-floored passage to a frosted-glass door which said "Kelso Advertising, Advertising Agents and Marketing Counsellors". There was a very pleasant grey-and-yellow reception room. With a very pleasant ash-blonde woman behind a desk.

She pulled two cords out of the telephone switchboard. "Good morning." I recognized the Irish lilt I had heard on the telephone.

"Morning. Mr. Farquhar, please. He's expecting me."

"What name, please?"

"Garvie."

She telephoned, spoke a few words then pointed. "Second door on the left."

Farquhar's room was very smooth, very soft in a *décor* of black, tan and a few little discreet splashes of brilliant green. I shut his walnut-faced door silently behind me and walked across the deep carpet. It was quite a small room and looked as if somebody busy worked in it; the big desk and some of the floors were strewn with newspapers, rough proofs, artwork.

Farquhar was short, tubby and very much moustached with a light-brown "handlebar" growth that smiled even when he didn't. He looked at me pleasantly through horn-rimmed spectacles.

I took off my hat and shook hands. "Mr. Farquhar. My name's not Garvie. It's Daly. I'm a private investigator."

He smiled as if a little uneasy. "What's all the mystery? You got a warrant for my arrest or something?" He indicated a chair. "Daly, you said?"

I unbuttoned my coat and sat down. "I didn't intend coming to you at all, Mr. Farquhar. I've been avoiding it as long as possible. But I find at this stage it's necessary."

"At what stage?" He held open a cigarette-box. I took a cigarette. I rubbed the side of my chin slowly as if pondering on the choice of words. Then I said: "I've come to see you about the death of James Kelso, your late director."

His face lost its cheerfulness. He fitted his cigarette into a black holder reflectively, slowly. "Oh, that business." He put the holder in his mouth. "I didn't think there'd be anything to investigate in that now. Terrible business it was. But you know what the verdict was—Death by Misadventure."

I lit his cigarette and mine. "Yes." I inhaled and let smoke drift to the ceiling.

He shrugged. "Well—what? How can I help you now?"

I fingered my cigarette, looked at it thoughtfully, then looked at him. "Look, Mr. Farquhar, before I can say anything about this at all, could I have your word that it would be treated strictly confidentially between you and me?"

He frowned good-naturedly. "Well, with certain conditions. For example, does it affect this agency or people in it?"

"Yes, it does. But I promise I'm working on the right side of the law. Anything I'm doing, believe me, won't harm you."

He shrugged his burly shoulders. "Okay. Let's hear it."

"Will we be interrupted?"

"I'll fix that." He pressed a button on an intercom instrument and said, "See that I get no calls for the next half-hour."

I sat back. "I want to tell you right away that Mrs. Kelso does not believe your boss was killed accidentally."

He kept looking at me for a long time. Then, slowly, he took the cigarette-holder from his mouth and thoughtfully flicked the ash into a black plastic bowl. "That, Mr. Daly, is very serious. Did she tell you this?"

"Yes. In fact, she asked my advice about—certain things."

He said nothing—just kept looking at the end of his cigarette for a long time before he spoke. Even his merry-looking moustache couldn't hide the worried look. "This is the first I've heard of any suspicions about his death. She hasn't said a word to me."

"She certainly wouldn't, Mr. Farquhar. Her evidence for getting to this kind of idea is very slender. And until we can get more, not a word of this is to get anywhere. My coming to you today is a big risk. If she knew I had confided in you, she'd dismiss me from the investigation tomorrow." I laid on the undercover-agent touch. He seemed convinced.

He drew on his cigarette through the holder. "Do the police know anything about this?"

"Not a thing. What is there to tell them? What we've found is so far-fetched and slim, they'd never attach any importance to it, anyway. No, Mr. Farquhar, this is just a vague kind of notion that has a weak basis—but a basis, nevertheless."

"You can't tell me—"

"I can't. You can understand why."

"Naturally. If she's engaged you to probe this business further, I can understand why you can't discuss it."

He said it—not me. He obviously believed now that Mrs. Kelso had engaged me to investigate her husband's death. This was Daly's day!

I said: "And you can see why not a word of my visit must reach her."

He nodded. "Sure. I see that." He paused. "D'you mean to say that she thinks somebody *else* shot him on that river?"

I nodded. "She thinks there's a possibility."

"Do you?" He looked up at me.

I shrugged. "Could be. We've got *some* kind of scrappy evidence. All I'm trying to do now is strengthen it."

He sat back. "Now, how d'you think I can help?"

I paused before speaking. "If there's anything in this theory at all, Mr. Farquhar—that is, if Kelso was murdered deliberately—can you think of any reason why anyone should kill him?"

He was shaking his head slowly, deliberately, even before I'd finished talking. "Not a reason in the world. He had his ups and downs, of course. Not everybody liked him. But that's business—specially for a boss of an advertising agency. But he had no—whadyoucall'em—"

"Conflicts."

"That's it. No conflicts. His money was okay. No trouble with his wife—no serious trouble, anyway—just the usual domestic ups-and-downs. I can't think of anybody who disliked him—not *that* size of dislike, anyway."

"It appears, Mr. Farquhar, that at the time he was fishing on that river, he should have been in London. Everybody thought he was in London. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right. In fact, when I first heard the news I got a shock. I thought he was in London. He did leave for London by a plane from Hindford Airport at noon on the—let's see—the Tuesday."

I thought about that. "That would get him to London about two o'clock on the afternoon of Tuesday."

"And I know he did business in London on Tuesday afternoon. I got a call from him speaking from a research outfit asking for some figures to be sent down."

"A research outfit?"

"Yes," he said. "Market research. E. J. Manders Ltd. They occasionally do a survey job for us for our clients. Anyway, he was *there* Tuesday afternoon about four."

"Which means he must have travelled north again Tuesday night or Wednesday morning by plane?"

"Yes. Probably the early plane Wednesday."

"So he *was* in London." I drew on my cigarette. "Tell me, Mr. Farquhar, do you know a man called Callingway? Henry J. Callingway."

"He's the whisky man, isn't he? Callingway—yes, he's got a whisky on the market. I forgot its name. I've never met him."

"Did Kelso know him?"

Farquhar sat up. "Y'know, I often wondered if he did."

My ears tingled. "How?"

"Well, a few months ago I suggested to him that we might make a bid for Callingway's account. At that time I knew they wanted to change their agents, and I felt we had a sporting chance of it—probably you know we make quite a speciality here of liquor advertising, and although we're a provincial outfit, we *do* handle whisky advertising very well."

"What happened? Did you try?"

"He got really mad. Told me he wouldn't take the account if they offered it with a bonus. I was amazed at this attitude. I asked

him for his reasons but he just yelled that he didn't want the blasted account under *any* circumstances. I remember he *did* mention Callingway's name—something about him being a reptile." He shrugged. "So I never mentioned it again. But I got the distinct impression he knew Callingway."

I said nothing for a few minutes till I got all that imbedded in my mind. Then, "Did he come in here on the Wednesday before going up north?"

"No. Neither he nor Mrs. Kelso were here on the Wednesday morning. I was in the office all day."

"This research outfit he visited in London. Any idea what his business was with them?"

He emptied his cigarette-holder. "Yes, I think it was a whisky survey."

"Whisky?"

He smiled. "Yes. Nothing surprising in that, is there? The four whisky accounts we handle are our biggest business."

"Any idea what kind of research was being made?"

"I don't even know if it *was* a research. In a busy agency, Mr. Daly, you just don't get the time to discuss the other fellows' accounts too much. I have my little loads of worry"—he indicated the papers around him—"and he had his."

"Did Kelso personally handle all four whisky accounts?"

"Yes. At any rate, he did all the senior contact-agreeing budgets, media selection—all the big decisions. Probably Manders were fixing some survey for one of them."

I stubbed out my cigarette. "Well, I could go on this way for hours yet, Mr. Farquhar, but I don't want to take up any more of your time. You've been very helpful."

He rose. "I hope you think so. I don't."

I picked up my hat. "Maybe my inquiries'll lead nowhere, but I must make them."

"Of course you must—specially if Mrs. Kelso thinks it wasn't an accident." He shook his head. "You've given *me* something to think about now. I just can't imagine...."

I patted his arm. "Get it out of your mind, Mr. Farquhar. Maybe there's nothing in it at all."

He looked at me, frowning. "I hope not. For Mrs. Kelso's sake—and the business."

"You seem to have a nice business here."

"It's not a big agency. It's healthy."

As he was about to open the door, I said, "By the way, I suppose this promotes you now?"

"Yes," he said. "Everything's got some mixed blessing in it. Mrs. Kelso made me agency chief on Friday."

"Best of luck."

I left him as he descended into his proofs.

I went back to the same call-box and phoned Dick Lamont.

"D'you play billiards?" he asked.

"Why?"

"We found who Scarlie was telephoning from the McNab Hotel at Fort William."

"Who was it?"

"A place called the Toledo Billiard Hall in Ormond Road."

I was wishing Mavis hadn't got that number at Fort William. There are times when news-hunting and private investigation do not mix.

Dick seemed to understand my silence. He said: "Relax. I did the phoning myself and I said it all the right way—'Sorry, wrong number'."

I sighed. "Where is Ormond Road?"

"North-east. Take a taxi as far as Mandersly Cross and walk north. The number is five-eighty-one. You want me with you?"

"No."

"I could send Mavis." I heard him chuckle.

"I'll come into the office when I get back."

"You mean *if*. Seriously, Ken, it's rough."

"I'll blacken my face and wear a ginger moustache."

"Okay—suit yourself."

I hung up.

Mandersly Cross district looked wet, dreary and dirty. It seemed to be one of those towns within a city that serve as antheaps for the deadbeats or places where rich men can point to as their birthplaces. Dark grey tenement buildings ran from the ends of factories to their own melancholy conclusion of gable ends that merciful billposts had covered with colour. It was a district of pawnshops, pubs and street lavatories—a district that sprawled and lolled and gaped in front of the gasworks at the passing tramcars and crowded main streets.

I paid off the taxi at the entrance to a subway and walked along the worn flagstone pavement. People shuffled past me or didn't

trouble. Thin men who hadn't shaved leaned in tenement entrances. Others were reading racing-form papers at corners or half-sitting on the window-ledges of small, garish shops. Truck-men were unloading beer into the yawning basement of a place called "Sammy's Howl". There was a smell from a fish shop. Across the road a huddled group of weary-looking men and youths were queuing for the afternoon opening of a small cinema designed many years ago to represent an Eastern palace.

All the time the tramcars clanged past, lorries trundled, cars hurried to get the smell past them. The cobbled streets reminded me of some German city streets—big, wide, strong, ugly.

I found the entrance to the Toledo squeezed between a hire-purchase furniture store and a small, dingy café. There was hardly anything that made it different from any of the other tenement entrances. It was dark, grey-greeny, worn.

I walked through the passage-way, down three steps and into the billiard hall. It was quite dark in the place except over in the far corner where three men were playing snooker on a green table ablaze with light. As my eyes got used to the gloom I saw that there were about a dozen tables, most of them with dirty white shrouds over them. Then I saw the little office on my right with its door half-open and a weak, yellow electric light shining on a short, fat man who had a cigarette dangling from his bottom lip. He was reading a newspaper.

I walked up to the door and said, "Got a table?"

He laid down his newspaper and, puffing and coughing, came out into the gloom. His eyes were watery and he wore no tie—just a dirty silk scarf folded over his chest inside his jacket. He wore a cap. He looked at me. "You by yourself?"

"Yes. Want some practice."

He looked at me again then turned to a large switchboard on the wall where he flicked a trigger. The table next to the one being used by the three men was suddenly flooded with light.

I said, "Got one further down?"

"Sure." He changed switches and illuminated another table, away from the trio. "That do?"

"Fine."

"Billiards?"

"Snooker."

He fetched the triangular box of coloured balls, put them in my hands. "Chalk's on the table."

I walked up to the blaze of light as he watched me all the way. I set up the balls, took off my coat and hat, hung them on a peg, chose a cue, chalked it and started playing.

If I had conducted a brass band from that table I couldn't have invited more interest. The interest was hidden all right, but it was there. The three players were watching every stroke between their own play. And it was when I heard the jingle of passing money that I thought of an old billiard-room trick.

Although it was months since I had touched a cue, I was still one of those snooker players that considered clearing the reds a tiresome necessity before the real game started. I had sunk two of them before I began to think about these three cue-pushers two tables up. In my next shot, I deliberately miscued. Then I sunk my own white ball, apologetically got it out of the pocket and started again. My next shot was accurate enough except that I potted the wrong ball.

I kept this kind of play going for about fifteen minutes before the dividend began to show. I heard a mumble of voices from the other table, then footsteps as one of them sauntered down to me. Out of my eye-corner I saw him lean against the wall near me and I knew he was watching every stroke. I sank a red ball from table-length and put on a quiet air of teeth-whistling assurance. After the next shot, the fish bit the hook and I pulled.

He said, "You wanna game, mister?"

I straightened up and smiled. "Well—I'm not too good. Just putting in half an hour for some practice."

He was a short man—thin and very dark. He wore a crumpled grey pin-stripe suit—no hat. His hair was black, wavy and looked a stark mass against his white face. One of his teeth at the front was missing.

He uncoiled himself from the wall. "You've got the right man to play against here. I'm not so hot."

Like hell, I thought. He looked the type who potted everything right through to the yellow, then left a stinker of a snooker just to give the game a spike-up!

I shrugged. "Well—okay."

He chose a cue. "We'll finish this set." He nodded at the balls on the table. "It'll save setting them up."

He took first shot and hit one of the reds, missing the pocket by miles. I thought his underplay was a bit overdone too early. I

banged an easy red into a pocket like a shot rabbit and then tried the black which I missed.

That was the way the game went on until, mercifully, he sank the black from a position a pet chimp could have sorted out.

I offered him a cigarette. "Want another go?"

"Sure." He grinned. "Wanta put something on it?"

I shrugged. "Okay. A quid?"

He went through the act like a professional. "That's a bit much. I don't usually play for money. Ten bob?"

"Okay. Ten bob."

We set them up and started. He played me down as far as all the reds. He even let me win right up to the blue. Then he got a bit tired and hammered home the remaining two colours for a short win. He even had the nerve to say something about "Must be my lucky day". I paid up and took care he saw the other notes in my case.

"Another one?" I asked.

"Sure. You'll get a chance to get the ten bob back."

"A quid this time?"

He grinned. "Okay."

The other players at the table farther up had stopped now. I heard them go out. Now the little man and I were alone in the billiard hall. I decided the time for clean-up was now.

I cued first this time. I sank every red ball, then left him a wonderful snooker behind the black.

He gaped at that little white ball behind the black beauty that shut it off from the rest of the table. As I idly chalked my cue I thought about hiring him a grab-crane to get that snooker cleared.

He leaned one elbow on the table edge, gripped his thin chin slowly and said quietly, "Just half an hour for some practice!"

I continued chalking my cue. "You could take it off the cushion."

He straightened up. "I could take it off the ceiling." He played the shot skilfully enough, but any player who might have got through that snooker would have needed radar! He lost the game 186 to 10.

He took my ten-shilling note from his pocket, laid it on the table-edge. "Put the other half on account."

I leaned on the table and said in a low voice, "Keep it." He spread his hands on the edge and looked at me.

I went on, still speaking quietly, "I want some information. Is it worth five quid?"

He whispered, "What size of information?"

"Where can we talk?"

"Set up the coloureds again. Mick's watchin' us. I'll tell you later."

I set up the balls and we continued playing.

He potted the yellow. "You know North Bisley Street?"

"No. Where is it?"

"Turn left out of here. Get on a tramcar and take it two stages. Come off at North Bisley. McGuire's pub is at the corner. Come in there—straight through to the lounge."

I sank the brown. "Okay. You go out first when we've finished." He put the blue away. "Take your time. I'll wait."

We finished the game and he went out. I set the coloured balls up again, played them for ten minutes then put on my coat and hat.

Mick came out from behind his newspaper.

"How much?" I asked.

"Three shillings." He looked at the clock.

I paid him and went out.

McGuire's pub was light ochre, heavy, big and old-fashioned. There were four people standing at the bar and a large grey cat was sitting on it.

I walked through to the rear and through a doorway marked "Lounge" to a very naked-looking, dark-brown room that had a picture of Vancouver on the wall. I thought that a good sign.

The little man was sitting at the large, oblong, dull mahogany table with a glass of beer in front of him.

I took off my hat. "How d'you get a drink?"

He reached behind him to a bell-push and pressed it. "What you havin'?"

I sat down. "I'll get it."

He finished off his beer, licked his lips. "I'll have a whisky—Macanly's."

"Suits me."

The attendant came and stood in the doorway. The little man said, "Two whiskies, Archie."

"Big or wee?"

"Big," I said. He disappeared.

I produced cigarettes. "I want some information."

"You said that. Who are you? You a cop or somethin'?"

I shook my head. "I'm a Canadian. I came over here to try and trace my brother. I haven't seen him in ten years. I can't find him."

His face smoothed out with relief. "Your brother? I thought you was on the run from something—or maybe a dick. You think he's here—in this district?"

"I don't know. I don't think so." The whisky came in then and I stopped talking till Archie had gone. "What's your name?"

"Connelly, Syd." He picked up the whisky glass. "What's yours?"

"Sorbie. Dan Sorbie." I watched his face but it registered nothing. "My brother's name's Peter. You ever heard of him?"

He shook his head. "No. Doesn't ring a bell. What makes you think he's around here?" He looked suspiciously at me.

I drank some whisky. "I traced him to . . . well, a place outside Glasgow. And that's as far as I got. I know he was making phone calls from there."

"Phone calls to where?" His eyes were now watching my face closely.

"That billiard hall." I waited till that sunk in, drank some whisky, and hoped the charge would ignite.

It did. Connelly drained his whisky, rose and said, "Thanks for the drink."

I held his arm. "Just a minute. You know I'll be back, don't you?"

He looked down at me. "Back where?"

"Back to that billiard hall. Tomorrow and maybe the next day—then next week—for a long time." I paused. "And I'm going to play snooker with you. I'm going to say 'Hi, Syd—wanta game?' every time I come in there."

He sat down. "You tryin' to put a bite on me?"

I pressed the bell-button. "I'm trying to put this kind of bite on you. I'm going to get another drink for us then I'm going to pay you sweet money to tell me some very simple things."

Archie opened the door. I ordered more whisky.

Syd combed his fingers through his black hair. "What d'you want me to tell you? I don't know your brother. I've never even heard of him. Why don't you go to the cops?"

"Because the police would get me medical treatment for my

mental health if I gave them any story like this. You know that. My brother was telephoning that billiard saloon. All I'm asking you is why."

Archie came back with the drinks. I paid him and he went out. Syd picked up his glass, sipped it and looked at me. "You got life insurance?"

I took out my wallet, counted out twenty pounds in five-pound notes and laid them under my glass. I said nothing.

He looked at the notes for a time, drank more whisky and said, "Let's have the dough."

"I'll pay by instalments." I pushed a note across. "Just tell me."

He picked up the note. "Your brother's in bad company."

"I know that. Who's the company?"

"Fella called Keenan. He gets into the hall most nights between eight and eleven. Usually got two gorillas with him—one called Gatti and another called Dan Ogden."

"What's Keenan look like?"

"Big. About forty. Tough."

I thought for a moment. "Wears a grey felt hat low over his eyes? Dark chin? Small eyes?"

"That's him," Connelly said. He paused. "Look—you know him? What've I got myself into? That mob's tough—"

"Relax." I pushed over another note. "Listen. How do you know these are the people my brother was phoning?"

"You're bein' funny! Keenan *owns* the Toledo."

"He *owns* it? Who's that old guy Mick. . . ."

"He's the attendant. Collects the money."

I swallowed some whisky. "You any idea why my brother might phone him?"

"About a thousand. And not one of them's straight. Keenan's in everything. He runs a protection mob from here up to Lesterhall Park—working on the small shopkeepers. He's got two clip joints in town. He operates a small bookmaker's ring and he's got contacts everywhere. Keenan's one big man—and he's twisted all over. Gatti's a Glasgow-Italian. Always wears a leather jacket."

"Where is the phone in the Toledo?"

"Through at the back. There's a private office."

I pushed over another note.

"Would you know if Keenan's got any interest in liquor?"

"Liquor? You mean—makin' it?"

"Stealing it."

He shrugged. "Keenan would take anything. I never heard of a special interest."

I gave him the last note. "Thanks. You earned it."

He put the money in his pocket and rose. "If this blows back...."

"It won't blow anywhere. Get it out of your mind." I grinned.
"You should learn to play snooker."

He smiled awkwardly. "I should mind my own business."

I got up. "I'll go out first."

"We'll go out together. Archie knows we're here together."

"Okay."

We walked out and, once outside, he left me without a word to run for a passing tramcar.

It was nobody's fault. Graham *did* tell the head clerk to send me straight into his office and when I got there Margo Kelso was standing beside him behind his desk which was littered with rough visuals of advertisements for Scotch Dirk whisky.

Graham looked up and smiled. "Hello, Daly."

I took off my hat. "I didn't know you were engaged. They sent me right in."

"I know. Take a seat. When we discuss advertising, everybody's in on the act. It's the least confidential thing in any business."

I said, "Hello, Mrs. Kelso."

She smiled.

Graham said, "You know each other?"

I sat down. "Yes, we met—not so long ago."

Mrs. Kelso offered no explanation.

Graham put his hand in his jacket pocket and stepped back to take another look at the rough visuals on the desk. "You know anything about advertising, Daly?"

"Everybody does."

Mrs. Kelso smiled. "Thanks, Mr. Daly."

Graham grinned. "Is that a reminder for me to lay off criticizing these roughs?"

She said, "The visualizer said he'd resign if you altered them!"

He picked up one sketch and held it up for me to see. It was a well-dressed, clean layout—traditional-looking to me, but the headline "Have a Glass of Scotland" struck me as quite attractive if nothing else. He lifted his eyebrows good-humouredly by way of query. "That it?"

I said, "You want me to contradict a lady?"

"That's what agents are for—contradicting."

"Seems okay to me."

"Make you buy Scotch Dirk?"

I grinned. "That and one big thirst."

He threw it on the desk, gathered up all the roughs neatly, gave them to her. "Pass two per cent commission to Mr. Daly. You should hire him."

She smiled as she slipped the visuals into a large, flat wallet. "Everyone else does. Why not me?" She picked up her handbag and gloves. "You'll see the proofs in a fortnight, Mr. Graham."

"Okay," Graham said. "Watch the bottle. The last scraper-board drawing—something happened to it. It filled in or fuddled-up or something."

"I'll see it's all right this time, Mr. Graham. G'bye." She nodded to me and went out.

Graham produced a bottle of scotch and poured two drinks. "Bad business to offer your ad agent a drink. They get ideas."

"What kind? They lose heart in the product?"

He grinned and passed me my glass. "They might lose their head in it. Cheers."

"Cheers."

He laid down the glass. I did the same. Then I came straight to the point. "Callingway tells me you want me fired."

"That's right." He looked at me quite evenly, quite pleasantly, his blue eyes just touched, and no more, with friendliness.

"You want to develop the thought—now that I'm here?"

He accepted one of my cigarettes. "Yes. I would. I don't think you have a dog's chance."

"Chance of what?"

"Getting my whisky back."

I lit our cigarettes. "I said I'd try."

He leaned back and pulled the skin of his lean, youthful face thoughtfully. "I want to be very honest about this business, Daly. I don't think you did try. That whisky was stolen fifteen miles this side of my distillery at Inveraray. So far as I know, you haven't even been up to *see* the place, far less make any inquiries up there. And that's why I went to see Callingway soon's I got back. I suggested you should come off the case and I still say so."

I inhaled deeply and watched the smoke snake out. I did some thinking before I spoke. "Mr. Graham, I wasn't hired to find your

whisky. That's what the police are trying to do for you. Mr. Callingway engaged me to investigate a racket."

"Are you telling me my stolen whisky isn't part of the racket?"

"I'm telling you it's only a part. Whatever section of the hemisphere your whisky's in now, you can be sure it isn't one place—and that's fifteen miles this side of Inveraray. It's more likely to be in South Battersea or in the Houses of Parliament. What I'm trying to do is find who's setting up this racket—who the people are and how they operate."

"Well, I may be a bit dense, Daly, but I don't see how that's very widely divorced from investigating *my* disaster."

"It's this much different. Investigation is like a coconut stall at a fair. You only have a few balls and you have a lot of things you can hit. If you try to hit them all you draw nothing. I prefer to select just a few things and pound them till I knock them down one after the other. Your whisky steal was not one of them."

"You might run out of balls."

"One thing I'm *not* running out of are things to hit, Mr. Graham. I don't need your individual whisky case."

He pursed his lips and shrugged. "Well, I'm being quite frank both with you and Callingway. I just don't see what results we're getting for having hired you. I don't think Callingway does either."

"Why? Did you ask him?"

"Yes. All he told me was something about you having found some informant who wanted to sell you information about this whisky gang for five hundred pounds."

"It seems I've got about as much security guarantee as a barber's pole. You and Callingway will be telling me my horoscope next."

He shrugged. "We're interested parties."

"Where is Callingway? He went out of his hotel later that night. I haven't seen him since."

"He's in London. Blew off in a hurry, apparently."

I reached for my hat. "Well—where am I?"

He smiled. "I don't know. I've spoken my mind quite frankly. It's up to Callingway to say whether he wants you to continue on the case."

I rose. "One thing you *can* be certain of, Mr. Graham. I *am* staying on the case."

For a moment his face clouded. "You *do* realize you were engaged privately by the Association?"

"I realize this. A guy called Henry J. Callingway hired me to

break a racket at twenty pounds a day plus expenses. As far as I'm concerned now he can keep the fee." I stubbed out my cigarette in the ash-tray. "I just like the case—at this stage. I began investigating when I was two. It's a habit private dicks can't stop once they start. And I'm staying on this one till the end of the line. Callingway or anybody else can sit back and enjoy the ride or stay still and develop ulcers."

He got up, frowning. "Well, this is a confidential business, Daly...."

"It's so confidential I have a news-cutting file on it four inches deep. The police have been on it two years. They'll be making a film about it soon if the racket's not stopped."

He grinned. "You sound as if you were carrying a torch for Scotch whisky."

I said: "That's the real laugh. I prefer Canadian rye any time!"

He walked round his desk. "Well, I hope you'd prefer I talked honestly."

"I do, Mr. Graham." I made for the door. "And that's how I feel, too—this is the time to make the State of the Union Speech."

He held out his hand. "You sort it out with Callingway, anyway."

I shook hands. "Sure." I turned. "By the way—talking for a minute about the Kelsos...."

He stopped. "Yes?"

I frowned in thought as I spoke. "I got the idea that Henry Callingway knew James Kelso—was a friend or an acquaintance of his. D'you know if he was?"

"Yes, Callingway *did* know him." He thought for a moment. "In fact it was I who introduced them—in London." He thought again. "I think it was at some whisky convention or dinner or something."

"Did they get to know each other fairly well?"

He laughed. "Well, you know what these boozy things are. But I'd say yes—I remember Kelso met him the following day. Why all this?"

"Just—curiosity. You know—big-nose."

"You know the Kelsos. Did you know James Kelso well?"

"I only knew him dead."

"Yes, Callingway told me—it was you and he that found him in the boat, wasn't it?"

"That's right."

"Nasty business. I lost a good friend."

"So did I."

CHAPTER NINE

I GOT into my hotel after six. I felt tired, so I went straight up to my room, took off my shoes and jacket, and lay down on the bed. What I needed more than anything else was time to think—and I would take this time right here and now in this hotel bedroom.

I lay down on the pillow, shut my eyes and thought about the late James Kelso. Kelso was not killed by accident—somebody murdered him and left the gun hidden in the river mud. Let's have a flashback. Kelso comes into Anderson's hotel around noon, he lams back four big drinks, grabs something to eat and tears out looking mad. He comes back about four with Mrs. Kelso. From my sight of them at the hotel door, both of them look mean and sulky. Why? They had been up at their bungalow. It was damp—understandable in the late autumn after not being inhabited for a time—and this is why they decide to stay overnight at the hotel. But why the scowls? Why does nobody say anything about Kelso's *first* appearance at the hotel? Where is Mrs. Kelso then? Why isn't she with him? Is she at the bungalow alone? . . .

I sat up.

Knucklehead. You're a zanie, Daly!

Alone. Alone? A woman like Margo Kelso?

Why hadn't I thought of that one?

She was with a man.

There it was—a man. *Cherchez* nothing but one human being of the male sex.

Who?

I lay back on the bed.

The theory had things about it I liked. It would account for Kelso's four large drinks serving as fuelling for the Big Say up in the bungalow. It would account for both Kelsos coming back to the hotel—he having had the Say and she more or less promising to be good in future. It *could* account for that telephone call from a man to Mrs. Kelso that night. It could account for—I opened my eyes—Kelso's murder.

I reached out my hand and took the telephone instrument on to

my chest. I lifted the receiver, and asked for the number of Police HQ in Glasgow. I asked for Pollok and was put through to him.

I said: "Hi, Polly. This is Garcia. I've got a message."

"You're drunk."

"I'm thinking."

"That's more dangerous."

I said: "Listen, Polly. Who's Mrs. Anderson?"

"*Hans* Anderson?"

"Don't be funny. Anderson at the hotel up north. Who's his wife? I've never seen her."

I heard him sip some tea before he said: "That was a point, Kenneth, that worried me. So I made investigations. She's in Glasgow."

"Divorced?"

"Legal separation. Left him eighteen months ago—over a woman."

I paused to think about that. "You've got a point."

"That's right." There was a pause. "I have a point. Now you ask me who the woman was and I tell you I don't know because she refuses to talk about it. Nobody at the hotel knows either. It was a very quiet, decent burial of a good, healthy marriage. No flowers."

"Where does she stay—his wife?"

"In Glasgow." He sipped more tea. "If you just sit on your back-side for another hour I'll send you over the complete confidential dossier complete with police pictures and a cross marking the body."

I grinned. "You need a drink, Polly."

"I need my pension. When're you coming down to give us some public property?"

"What public property?"

"What you found out at Fort William."

"Don't you fellows get any out-of-town expenses? I found nothing that would interest you. I'm a *private* investigator."

"I don't remember anything terribly private about the last visit we had from you—when you wanted to know what we had on Callingway and Mrs. Kelso and the King of Siam."

I thought about that. "We should repeat the session soon."

"This time we'll listen while *you* talk."

"You were giving me Mrs. Anderson's address...."

"I was not. But I will. She stays with her sister at Twenty-four Eightmyres Crescent, Northdean."

I sat up quickly and wrote this down on the pad by my bedside.
"Thanks, Polly."

"You won't get anywhere. You're on the wrong lead with Anderson."

"Give Mr. Rae my regards." I hung up.

I doodled on that piece of paper for a long time. Pollok had checked on Mrs. Anderson—probably tried to find out who was her husband's girl-friend over whom they split. Why? For the same reason as I was now going to see her. The girl-friend *could* have been Margo Kelso. Why not? If she was, Anderson had a motive for murder. He had the opportunity. It was *he* who suggested the fishing trip. It was *he* who offered the loan of gear. It was *he* who suggested the actual pool in the river—that quiet, still, remote, weed-hidden spot where anything could be fired at anything and the noise camouflaged by Seton's duck-shooting. Yes, Anderson had the opportunity all right.

Northdean was definitely a residential area. It lay beyond the north boundary of the city where a long boulevard left the squalid tenements and, two miles later, swept into a community of bungalows and lawns and trees and hedge-skirted crescents. It was after seven when I drove along Vine Avenue, flooded widely and generously with amber street lights. The roadway was deserted. This was a district where few people walked; those not at home inside those arch-doored little palaces were out in their cars. The night was sharp and clear. The tidy, trimmed hedges and little cherry trees glistened faintly and beautifully with the autumn frost. They seemed almost blue against the contrasting amber lighting.

The hotel porter earned his tip. The directions he had given me were perfect—and they included second-on-lefts, fifth-on-rights and a complete arc round a wide crescent. This was Eightmyres Crescent—quiet, secluded, its darkness relieved by the warm lights from behind the warm curtains of the bungalows.

I came out of the car and walked up the pebbled driveway to a white-wood-and-glass front door. I pressed the bell and heard the discreet chimes. Someone—a woman—walked softly through the dimly lit hall and opened the door. She was not so young but very smooth, tall and looked as if she would show up very well in the light. There was a very faint perfume.

"Good evening," I said. "I'd like to talk to Mrs. Anderson."

Her voice was deep, pleasant, cultured. "What is your name, please?"

"Daly. She doesn't know me. Are you Mrs. Anderson?"

"No, I'm not." She hesitated. "Could you tell me your business?"

"Well—no," I said. "I'd rather talk to her."

She held the door open. "You'd better come in."

She led the way through the small, carpet-fitted hall into a lounge with wide, chaste walls, a low brick fireplace and a deep, rich carpet of green. The room was furnished well, elegantly and comfortably with "woman" written all over it.

A shorter, older, well-trimmed woman got up from the easy-chair at the fireside, quietened a growling Scotch terrier dog at her feet.

The taller woman said: "This is a Mr. Daly, Doris. He has come to see you."

"How d'you do, Mr. Daly," Mrs. Anderson said. "Take off your coat and put it in the hall."

"No, thanks, Mrs. Anderson. What I have to say won't take long." I sat down on the settee and put my hat at my feet.

Mrs. Anderson was good-looking—brown-blonde, golden kind of complexion, blue eyes. She had a good figure and I put her age around forty. She waited on me to speak.

"I'm a private investigator, Mrs. Anderson——"

"Doris! Not a word. I'll get Peter. He's at the club." She went to a bright green telephone on a table in the corner.

"I wouldn't trouble if I were you," I said. "Why I'm here has nothing to do with Mrs. Anderson and her separation from her husband."

She did not lift the receiver. She paused, looking at me with her level, lovely grey eyes. "What is your business, Mr. Daly?"

"I've just told you, Miss. . . ."

"Mrs. Hawkins."

"... Mrs. Hawkins. I'm an investigator."

She looked austere now, demanding, "Investigating what, Mr. Daly?"

I smiled. "That, madam, is what I'd like to tell Mrs. Anderson, if you'd give me time. I don't think Peter would help us."

"He's my husband." She fingered her slender wrist-watch under her russet-brown silk dress. "And I can assure you, Mr. Daly, he will help us considerably if your inquiries have anything to do with my sister's separation. We do not wish to discuss it. Mr. Hardy

of Hardy and McEvoy, the legal firm in Glasgow, is the person to see...."

"Mrs. Hawkins, I am not here to discuss Mrs. Anderson's separation. Not in particular, anyway."

Mrs. Anderson was gazing at me anxiously. "Why do you want to see me, Mr. Daly?"

I looked at Mrs. Hawkins.

"It's all right," said Mrs. Anderson. "Julie's my sister. You can say anything while she's here."

Mrs. Hawkins said, "Because she'll *be* here, anyway, Mr. Daly."

"All right," I said. "Here it is. I said I was not here to discuss your separation from Mr. Anderson. And that's true—I am not going to discuss it particularly. But there is one aspect of it which affects a case I am working on and I think you are the only person who could help me clear this point up."

She said, "What is the case, Mr. Daly?"

"That is something I'm afraid I can't divulge, Mrs. Anderson. It's a confidential matter."

Mrs. Hawkins sat down in the other easy-chair. "Just tell us what it is you want to know, Mr. Daly." Her voice was more edgy. "Perhaps it's something we can't divulge, either."

Mrs. Anderson stilled her with a slight gesture. "Go on, Mr. Daly."

I breathed and took my time. "I'd like to know the name of the woman who came between you and your husband when you separated."

"I knew it!" Mrs. Hawkins said quickly. "Don't say any more, Doris."

"I wish you'd shut your big yap, Mrs. Hawkins! I'm investigating a murder."

Silence. If somebody had dropped cigarette-ash on that carpet, we might have heard it. They stared at me, wide-eyed. Mrs. Hawkins gripped the edge of her chair. Mrs. Anderson's pretty mouth was half-open. I heard the gentle ticking of the jade clock on the brick mantelpiece.

Mrs. Hawkins spoke first—so quietly, I could hardly hear her. "M-murder!"

I was quiet now, too. "I'm sorry I was rude. Forgive me. But this is a serious business."

"Murder!" It was Doris Anderson's whisper.

"Yes. That's what Detective-Sergeant Pollok of the police

couldn't tell you when he visited you. They haven't even a charge—no evidence whatsoever. But I can tell you the sort of case it is." I paused. "Now. Can you help me by telling me what I want to know, Mrs. Anderson?"

Slowly they pulled themselves out of their hypnotized astonishment. Mrs. Anderson looked at her fingers, then at her sister. "Is my husband—in any way involved in this business?"

I produced my cigarettes. "No, he's not. As far as I know, anyway."

Mrs. Hawkins said, "But why d'you want to know this, Mr. Daly?"

I offered her a cigarette which she declined. I replied: "I'm just working on a hunch, that's all. There may be nothing in it—nothing at all. But I've got to investigate it."

Mrs. Anderson accepted my cigarette and studied it thoughtfully before I lit it for her. I lit my own. "Of course, there are many other ways I could get this information but I thought this the quickest—and the most straightforward."

"There are not, Mr. Daly." Mrs. Hawkins' voice sounded firmer again. "Otherwise the police would have used them before that Mr. Pollok came here."

I realized I would have to show a glint of steel here. "There is one way, Mrs. Hawkins."

She crossed her long legs. "How?"

"I could get it from Anderson himself."

Mrs. Anderson looked at me. "I doubt if he'd tell you."

"The police would soon get it."

"Why didn't they?"

"It would mean arresting him."

Doris Anderson looked at me, horrified. "Arresting him? What for?"

"Concealing evidence. I could arrange that myself with Pollok." I was bluffing this right through. "This is a murder case. I'm investigating it—and I wouldn't stop at that if I thought it necessary." I paused to draw on my cigarette. "It won't be necessary at all—if you tell me who the woman was."

She looked across at Julie Hawkins, flicked some ash reflectively into the chromium bowl and said:

"Her name was Edna Crome."

I felt an avalanche inside me. I gulped and said, "Was she—did she stay locally?"

She sighed. "No. She came from Glasgow."

"Married?"

She nodded. "Yes. Her husband...." She stopped.

Julie said: "You've got so far. You may as well tell him the rest, Doris. Her husband is a doctor."

I picked up my hat. "I'm grateful, Mrs. Anderson."

She looked up at me and her blue eyes were worried. "Does it help?"

I shook my head. "Not a bit."

Mrs. Hawkins rose. "I can't say I'm sorry, Mr. Daly. A legal separation in the family's enough without getting involved in anything worse."

Mrs. Anderson said, "Is my husband connected in any way?"

I smiled. "Not now."

"But why come here at all, then?"

I rose. "I said he wasn't connected with the case *now*. Until you gave me this information there was a very vague, loose connection that may have fitted one day."

"You mean—he might have been suspected—of *murder*?" Her face was wide with astonishment.

"Not at all," I lied. "Nothing so serious. Just"—I shrugged—"a hunch I had about something." I sighed. "It was the wrong hunch."

Julie was still a little bitter. "It strikes me that the only person who's been doing any divulging at this discussion, Mr. Daly, has been my sister."

"Your sister's not a private detective, Mrs. Hawkins."

"She's a private citizen."

I shrugged. "Anyway, I'm grateful. It's saved me a lot of running around." I shook Mrs. Anderson's hand.

Julie Hawkins saw me coldly to the front door.

Driving down through these neat, clean, compact little terraces and avenues, I thought about the name Edna Crome. An unusual name. Very unusual in Scotland.

At the main boulevard I stopped the car and got out. I walked over the quiet roadway to a telephone kiosk at the corner. I opened the door, picked up one of the two telephone directories and flicked through the pages to the letter "C". There was no Crome. I replaced the book and shut the door.

Driving back to the city, two thoughts kept worrying me. The first was that Mrs. Anderson said Edna Crome's husband was a doctor, yet he was not listed in the Glasgow telephone directory.

The second thought I had was of a large chromium ash-bowl in that sitting-room. I remembered Mrs. Anderson looking at it before she gave me that name. Crome. Chrome.

CHAPTER TEN

THE house was not very large, as country mansions go. It was old—ivy-and-moss old—and in the crisp brightness of this wintry morning it looked as if it were awaiting the snow of Christmas to illustrate some greetings card. It looked a pleasant house, neat, orderly. The large door facing the pebbled courtyard had its brasses sparkling in the sunshine. The clear windows were like the clear eyes of an elderly, tweedy man who has lived well and straight.

Two huge retrievers bounded out barking when my feet crunched on the pebbles. Their sharp barks echoed round the courtyard.

“Sh. Good boy.”

They seemed harmless enough. I walked on and they pranced about me, making more and more noise. The door opened and a middle-aged woman in black and white appeared. “Geddown!” she said. “Down. Quiet!” The dogs stopped barking and sauntered off with wagging tails.

“Good morning,” I said. “Could I see Mr. Seton?”

She was a plump, cheerful Scotswoman. Her blue eyes looked me over quite frankly. “Mr. Seton? Well, he’s out. Out walking wi’ Sir George. They went doon by the river an hoor ago.”

“D’you think I might see them if I went that way?”

“Aye, ah suppose ye could.” She came out to the courtyard. “Straight doon here an’ through that iron gate by the end o’ the meadow. Ye might see them. They should be on their way back by this time. Ye’ll ken them, I suppose?” She puckered her eyes and looked at me suspiciously.

“Ken them?”

“Know them. Ye’ll know them?”

I smiled. “Yes, I think I’ll know them all right. If I don’t see them I’ll come right back here.”

“Aye—jist dae that. I’ll say you were here.” She looked at me. “What’s the name?”

“Daly.”

"Daly. Right. You gan doon, anyway, an' see if ye meet them."

"Thanks." I touched my hat and crunched back over the pebbles to the driveway.

I found them at the edge of the salmon pool. A slight, keen breeze was disturbing the usual mirror-like surface of the river at this part which rippled and dappled in the sunlight. Both men, their backs to me, were silently watching the pool. Sir George was dressed in his kilt—and it was a very colourful kilt of brilliant reds, blacks and deep, deep greens. Over this he wore a green tweed Highland jacket with shoulder-straps and leather patches at the elbows. On his head was a black Glengarry beret and he held a stout walking-stick. Seton wore a grey tweed jacket and dark-grey slacks.

I approached them quietly and waited a few steps behind. They did not hear me, so I said, "Morning."

"Sh!" Sir George signalled me with his hand without turning round. Seton turned his head, looked at me idly then continued to watch the river intently. I walked over beside them and watched the water, too.

Seconds passed . . . a minute. A fluffing breeze rippled the water's surface which otherwise moved downstream very, very slowly. Suddenly the middle of the pool exploded as if someone had thrown a bomb into the water. There was a flashing streak of pink-and-gold. I got a glimpse of a glinting arc of something before it came down on the surface with a huge splash—as if a log had hit the water. The wavelets rippled outward in widening circles which faded gradually until the pool was sparkling in the sun as before.

Sir George sighed. "Head'n tail."

"Not much good," said Seton.

I waited before I spoke. "What the hell was that?"

They looked at me. Sir George's bushy, white eyebrows came down as he examined me. Seton looked puzzled.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" asked Sir George quietly.

"He's asking what it was," said Seton, quite without anything else but genuine helpfulness in his voice.

The old gentleman fingered his clipped, white moustache and pursed his lips. "That, sir, was a salmon."

"I see," I said. "I came down here to see Mr. Seton. The woman at your house sent me."

"Me?" asked Seton.

"Yes. You remember me?"

His young face frowned in thought before it cleared. "Yes—I remember you now." He glanced at his host. "You were at the Fiscal's Court at Gilfillan."

"Daly's my name. I wanted to have a few words with you."

He still looked puzzled. "Oh yes—about what?"

Sir George coughed. "You want me to leave you?"

"No, it's all right," said Seton. "You want to talk here, Mr. Daly?"

"Yes, may as well. It's about this spot I want to talk about."

Sir George caught on to that one quickly. "If it's about this damn duck-shooting business, Daly, I think Mr. Seton's had about as much as he can stand. The whole thing's over. Damn bad accident—and that's that. Who're you from? You from a newspaper or something?"

I sighed and waited a few seconds. "I'm a private investigator."

"Private—you mean a detective?" Seton looked surprised.

"Yes. I've come here—"

"Just a minute, Dick," said Amoy. "Don't want to poke my nose in too far. But I think Mr. . . . what's your name, sir? . . . Daly'd better see your solicitor if there's any more investigation going on about this case."

I decided to play this one with the needle. I shrugged. "Okay. If that's how you want it, I can do that. I just wanted to try to save this boy another grilling in court, that's all—another *kind* of court this time."

Seton said: "What're you trying to say, Mr. Daly? Are you trying to tell us—"

"I'm trying to tell you that I don't believe you shot that man Kelso at all. If you'll both of you stop talking for a few minutes and give *me* a chance. I'll develop the thought."

The jab worked. Sir George shuffled his feet slightly and prodded the grass with his stick. He grunted, "Give'm his say, Dick."

Seton put his hands in his pockets. "Sorry if we sounded a bit rude, Mr. Daly. You can understand how touchy we are about—the whole thing. Especially me."

I took out my cigarettes. "Sure. You had a rough time. But I don't think you *should* have had all the recrimination, Mr. Seton."

He accepted a cigarette. "Well, I'd like to think that was true." He smiled sadly. "But I don't think there's much doubt that my pellets hit him."

Sir George refused a cigarette. I lit Seton's and my own, then I

turned round to the tall reeds that flanked the river all but at the little clearing where we stood. "Tell me, Mr. Seton—you say you're an *amateur* sportsman?"

"Very much so."

"Never shot a bird in his life before," growled Sir George.

"I know enough about wildfowling to realize that you must wait till your birds are well in the air before you fire. You didn't do that?"

He shook his head. "No. I didn't. I suppose, in a way, it was lucky I didn't do *more* harm than I did—if that were possible." He sighed. "I'll never touch a gun again."

"How low were you firing?"

Sir George said: "He wasn't firing low all the time, dammit. Give'm credit for *some* sense."

"You were only firing low *some* of the time?"

"Yes," said Seton. "Maybe one shot in every six or so."

"And those low shots at the river here. How low did you fire?"

Seton looked about him. Sir George held out his stick. "Give'm an idea with this, Dick."

Seton took the thick stick. "Yes. I'll try and show you." He raised the stick to his shoulder till it pointed slightly upwards at a very low angle from horizontal. "About there."

"Now keep the stick at that angle and turn to face the reeds."

He did so.

I said, "You clearing the reeds?"

"No."

"Then how the hell could you see duck?"

He lowered the stick and faced me, his young features clouded with thought and puzzlement. "Y'know—maybe . . ." His brow cleared. "But that couldn't be . . . Some of these shots I took, I was firing just at the top of the reeds."

"All right," I said. "You were firing just at the top of the reeds. Did you see duck there?"

"Yes—twice, at least. Just getting off."

"Okay. You agree that you'd have to see the duck just beginning to clear the top of the reeds before you'd fire?"

"Yes—just beginning to clear them."

I took the stick and held it up to my shoulder. "That would bring the elevation of your gun to at least *that*." I showed him the angle.

Both men took interest. "Yes," said Seton. "That's right."

I handed the stick back to Sir George. "You didn't shoot Kelso. If he were standing up in the boat—which is doubtful—and even if he were standing on another man's shoulders, you didn't shoot him."

Sir George was stroking his chin. His bushy eyebrows were drawn down. "Y'know, Dick—it's a point. You'd have had to be firing damn low—*damn* low."

"You're forgetting something obvious, Mr. Seton—the level of the river is below the bank. And you're trying to tell the Fiscal that you fired so low that you even came down sufficiently to take *that* into account!"

Seton stroked his face nervously with a trace of excitement in the motion. "Well, I . . . I naturally thought . . ."

"You naturally thought you were the only person who *could* have shot Kelso."

Sir George said, "Well, he *was* the only one near him."

"How d'you know?"

Silence. They looked at each other. Seton said, "But they were my pellets . . ."

"Pellets from a Cumberland gun."

Sir George uttered a sound of derision. "Oh, come, come, Daly! Look at the evidence. You're stretching coincidence, y'know."

I shrugged. "All right. Let's look at this part of it. If there were ten wildfowlers lined up all along this river-bank, how many of them would be handling Cumberlands?"

Seton looked at the older man who was thinking that one out. After a long pause, Amoy said: "Well, y'know, you have a point, Daly. I'd say seven of them. It's a damn popular gun for ducks. Best there is, too."

Seton said, "But there was nobody else around here that evening."

"You imagine that."

"Do you think there was?"

"Yes."

Amoy said: "Have you . . . ? D'you mean you've got some evidence of this?"

"I've seen the gun."

They stared at me. Seton whispered, "*What!*"

"I just wanted to check my ballistics." I grinned. "Is that the word, Sir George?"

Amoy was fingering his moustache, furiously excited. "Daly, I

don't know who you're doing this for—but I want to tell you this. If you get to the bottom of this damn thing and find somebody else killed that poor blighter, you won't find me ungrateful."

Seton grasped my arm. "Nor me, Daly—I can tell you that. It's been on my mind——"

"There's a long way to go, gentlemen—a long way yet. Meanwhile, will you do *me* a favour? Just forget you met me. Speak to nobody about it."

Sir George said, "You'll come and lunch with us."

"No, thanks. I've got more work to do." Maybe I'll see you later. I'll be at the Embassy Hotel in Glasgow from tonight. Phone me there if you want to speak to me. I'll get in touch with you soon."

I shook their hands and they left me to walk over the dry path through the reeds. I saw Seton make a note in a small pocket-book.

I waited a few minutes before I walked along the narrow banking to the spot at the water edge where I had seen the gun embedded in the river-mud. It was gone. To make quite sure of this, I examined small areas up and down. Then I found a long tree-branch and I prodded the river-bed, stirring the mud, feeling about for something hard that might be the gun. It was gone all right.

Even in the morning sunshine Mrs. Kelso's bungalow looked lonely and cold without the glimmer of firelight shining at the windows. I walked up the little rise from the direction of the river and I saw the grey motor-scooter lying against the end of the house. Just in time I fell flat on my face and chest. I lay quite still, slowly eased off my hat and inch by inch peeped through the tall grass. The door of the bungalow opened and Anderson came out. He turned a key in the lock, walked to the scooter, mounted, started up the engine and drove away.

I lay for a few minutes until I could no longer hear the "puff-puff" of the scooter's engine, then I rose and went to the bungalow.

The main door—the one used by Anderson—looked very much locked with a special Judd double-action. I knew this kind of nightmare so I decided to leave it. I was lucky. A smaller door at the rear—leading to the kitchen—had an ordinary two-in-five Cheltenham bit-slot. I worked away at this for twenty minutes with a little plastic ruler and a kind of wire skeleton that would shake the daylight out of Harry Pollok if he knew how I operated it at times.

The door opened. I was in.

I closed the door quietly behind me and took from my pocket a pair of cream-coloured chamois gloves—I had bought them years ago for Nicky McMahon's wedding—and put them on. The kitchen was small, neat, very clean and had nothing at all on the stove, drainboard or table. I went through to the lounge where—only a few days ago—Margo Kelso and I had played cat-and-mouse with our ideas, opinions, information. It looked the same—exactly the same—except that the place was now greyer, colder. There was no fire and no Margo Kelso.

I tried the fireside cupboard first. It held everything for a comfortable week-end in the country—liquor, cards, glasses, magazines. Then I carefully looked through the bookcase—especially the capacious bit down below. There was nothing but books and dark space.

I found it after half an hour. It was inside the grandfather clock out in the little hallway. No more serious attempt than that had been made to conceal it. And a mud-caked Cumberland duck-gun doesn't take much hiding. I took it out of the clock and got out of the house quietly the way I got in.

I passed no one in my walk from the bungalow down through the little dirt-road to where I had left my car hidden among trees before the main highway. I opened the boot, laid the gun inside and locked the boot. Then I got into the car and drove away.

When I went into the hotel bar his huge frame was lolling on one bent elbow over the counter. His back was to me and he looked like a big brown bear toying with a tiny whisky glass.

I sat on the stool next to him. "Well, Scarlie—you made it."

He heaved his weight round slowly to face me and he lifted a brown eyebrow slightly as he grinned. "Sure, Mr. Daly. I made it. You glad to see me?"

I called over the barman who looked as if he'd had his fill of stories by Scarlie told first person singular. I turned to Scarlie. "Whisky?"

"Yes—whisky. Mr. Callingway's whisky. Best there is." He winked. We got the glasses. I lifted mine. "Temperance," I toasted.

"Cheers." He swallowed his liquor and licked his lips. "Same again, Poncho." He leaned on his elbow and said to me, "I had to . . . disappoint you. . . ."

I kicked his legs to silence him and he winced slightly. I nodded to the barman's back. "You going back to town today?"

"Yes," he said. "Gotta get back today."

"Good. I'll give you a lift. I'm leaving now. That suit you?"

"Suits me. I've got your photographs with me." He winked.

We talked some more—about the weather, photography, France, deer-stalking—then we left. On the way out, in the hall, Anderson met us as he came out of his office. He smiled, looked uneasily at Scarlie. "Hello, Daly. Staying for lunch?"

"No, thanks. Got to get back."

He looked at me. "D'you have any . . . luck . . . this morning?"

"Yes, I think I did. Met Sir George Amoy and Mr. Seton. They were very helpful."

"Good."

"I see the bungalow's empty."

He look quite unconcerned. "Yes, I know. I was up a short while ago checking that our housemaid had cleaned it."

"I thought Mrs. Kelso might have been there," I called.

We left him.

Neither of us spoke till I had changed into top gear at the top of the coast road. It was about noon and the bright sunshine gleamed with incredible beauty from the snow-spattered sides of the distant mountains. The naked land—green-brown moor, bracken-patched hillsides, golden valleys—stretched and lolled in the brief, blazing embers of this crisp autumn day. The air was clear and crystal-like.

I opened the small side-window. "You were saying, Scarlie?"

"I was saying I had to disappoint you at my studio place."

"I was there."

"I know—I saw you go in."

I glanced at him. "That was bloody useful."

"I was standing in the doorway of an empty betting-shop right across the road. I wanted to wait there and see you go in—alone. This little deal we made was person-to-person. I don't deal with groups of more than one. So I waited there maybe five minutes. I knew you'd wait. I'd left the light on. Then I sees another car crawling along. It passed me and I kept back so's nobody would see me. This car went round the block. Later, two characters walked round the end of the building and into the entrance to my place. I recognized one of them in the darkness. And I had an idea who the other one was. And, believe me, Poncho, where these two guys are is just where a guy called Scarlie should be to hell out of —fast."

"So I got stuck with them."

"Yeh." He was rubbing his fat chin. "Yeh—you got them." He shrugged. "I couldn't do anything." He looked at me. "How'd you make out?"

I shrugged. "Slogged it—then ran like hell."

"They'd have done me in—for keeps." His voice sounded almost plaintive. "I know them."

"Who were they?"

There was a pause while he lit our cigarettes.

I repeated, "Who were they?"

He blew out smoke slowly. "You know what copyright is, dick. You still on the deal?"

I applied the brakes easily and drew in to the road verge. I switched off the engine, and said, "This O.K.?"

"For what?"

"For getting a lift to wherever the hell you like. You can pick up a truck."

His thick bottom lip fell slightly. "What's the matter with you, dick? Aren't you takin' me to Glasgow? What's the matter with you? Don't you want to listen?"

I put a finger on his chest and prodded the huge mass of shirt-covered flesh slowly. "Listen, balloon-head. These two guys who tried to beat me up were called Keenan and Gatti. Gatti was the one in the leather jacket. Keenan's a rat-hole racketeer from a Glasgow side-street who owns a billiard saloon called the Toledo in Ormond Road. He also operates protection in that part of the city in his spare moments. His pal Gatti is a refugee from an Italian fried-fish shop. The number you telephoned from the McNab Hotel in Fort William was that number—the Toledo. You ask for Annie and you pour it all down Keenan's big, fat ears—when the truck's leaving, what route it's taking and whether the driver blows his nose on Tuesdays." I jabbed him again. "That, cabbage-skull, was your job with the gang—a scout faked up like a photographer."

His blue eyes were staring. The half-smoked end of his cigarette dangled from his gaping bottom lip.

I took my finger away and drew on my cigarette. "Sure—you've got copyright, Scarlie—on nothing." I flicked my spent cigarette through the side-window. "About all you can tell me now is what brand of shoe polish Keenan uses."

He was pulling his thick, loose mouth with his thumb and

fingers slowly. Then he straightened his tie and opened the car door. "Okay, dick. Forget it. The market's died on me." He was about to heave his bulk out when I said:

"Scarlie."

"Yeh?" He turned his head.

"I don't know it all."

He twisted his lip to a wry grin. "You sound as if you invented it."

I nodded to the seat he had almost vacated. "Siddown. I owe you *some* dough."

He heaved back into the seat slowly. "What for?"

"Signing as Livingstone in the hotel register at Fort William. And making your phone call to Glasgow from your room. As an undercover man, you're a dead beat. But I still owe you something." I counted out thirty pounds in notes from my wallet and handed them to him.

He looked at me sideways, not even glancing at the notes. "Keep it."

I stuffed the notes in his top pocket. "I said I was in the market for information. I still am."

He took out a battered packet of cigarettes, took out a cigarette, lit it slowly and inhaled deeply. He looked at the glowing end between his fingers as smoke wafted from his mouth. "Okay. Let's go."

I started up the car. He closed the door as we moved off.

We said nothing for a long while. I let him do a lot of thinking. Anything I got now would be vital. Scarlie knew he would have to really earn his gen-money now.

When we reached the grey, drab little village of Logan Bridge, I stopped the car a few yards from the hideous lemonade sign beside the small store which was closed.

"Where's this?" he asked.

I looked at him. "Place called Logan Bridge. You know it?"

He shook his head. "Never seen it before. Looks a helluva dump. Why're we stopping?"

"Thought you might know it. I'm trying to trace a phone call made from here a few nights ago."

"From here?" He looked around at the little church, the ramshackle garage, the little hotel with the chamber-pots outside, the three cottages. "What kind of call? To do with whisky?"

"Maybe. That's what I want to find out."

He shrugged. "I didn't make it. Ask somebody."

"I did that—two days ago. I don't want to ask anybody else. I thought maybe you knew the place."

"Not me, dick. Never saw the place before." His blue eyes looked at me quite openly.

I started up the car again and drove south by the twisting road over the moor. The countryside was changing now. Even with the bright sunshine blazing the moor in warm olive-brown, it looked wilder, more desolate than the rolling hills we had left behind. A few miles over on our right, the sheer face of a mountain-side cut straight into the moor with hardly a breathing-space of foothills. A vast, dark smear of fir-trees swept round to where a foaming river tumbled and roared its fury down into the valley. Snow powdered the higher ridges of the moor.

I said, "Where've you been hiding?"

"Coatbridge. With my sister. About twelve miles out of Glasgow."

"How did you know I'd be at that hotel?"

"Your pal told me—Lamont. I phoned him. So I got a train."

I swung round a steep bend and down through a forest of pines. "You know the hotel?"

"Never seen it before." He paused, then looked at me. "You keep askin' me things like this. What goes on? Why're you up here?"

I didn't answer him. I asked more questions. "Last time we met you said you'd tell me the names of three of the gang. Who were they?"

"Keenan and Gatti."

"That's two."

"And a guy called Ogden."

"Who's he?"

He sighed. "I only met'm once—at the Toledo. Big character. Tough. Spoke with a Yorkshire accent. He was a truck driver. Only saw'm once."

"They don't operate from the Toledo. Where do they take the whisky?"

"I don't know."

I looked at him. "You don't know! At a five hundred quote, you're an expensive singer, Scarlie."

He moved his weight uncomfortably in the seat. "Look, dick—

I did a job for them. I did this job maybe twenty times. And each time I collected forty quid."

"What was the job? You went around the Highlands with a camera like you were a photographer——"

"I am a photographer, shamus." His voice had a tone of hurt dignity. "I been doing picture-features on Scottish scenery for years. That's what I'm telling you. You'll see my stuff nearly every month in one of the dailies. I made a Yankee magazine two months ago. The stuff I do for the glossy tourist papers is nobody's business. Look . . ." He fumbled inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a mass of crumpled, worn papers, "Take a look at some of these commissions. . . ."

"Okay—so you're a photographer! Nobody's arguing. What I want to know is what you did for this whisky outfit."

He replaced the papers, honour satisfied. "I kept my ears open, that's all. I moved around an' got to know the distillery boys at the local pubs an' shiny matches an' other places. There's a helluva lot of distilleries in the Highlands, dick. You can move from one town to another picking up information an' not do the same place twice in a year."

"Then what?"

"When I was dead sure about a load of whisky going south I phoned Keenan's place and gave him the time-table. I told'm when the lorry was leavin', what route it would take, what the load was."

I slowed behind a horse-drawn cart which was just turning into a little farm road. "Then what?"

"I phoned the Toledo. I asked for Joe."

"Joe who?"

"Joe nothin'. Just Joe. Sometimes Keenan spoke. Sometimes Gatti. When they weren't there, I had to phone back till I got them."

I accelerated past the cart as it went down the farm road. "How'd you get paid?"

"Forty quid a time—bang on the nail. They sent it in notes by registered mail to any address I said. I usually gave them the address at my next town."

"What happened then?"

"They did the job."

I looked at him. "Every job?"

"No, no—maybe one in five."

"Did they take you in on the jobs?"

"Nope. Never once." He shrugged. "That was the big-money stuff, doin' the job. The forty-a-time they paid me was peanuts. You could read that in the newspapers. Fifteen an' twenty thousand a time. The crumbs suited me."

"What did they do with the whisky?"

"Never knew. I always wondered. I thought maybe they was floggin' it as hooch or maybe just selling it under cover. But I never heard of a trace of it anywhere. An' they were as tight as hell. Never talked. Told me to stay where I was in the Highlands an' mind my own bloody business."

A snaking river was winding through the hills below us. We could see its course for miles till it disappeared in the haze of flat fields. I said, "You meet them often?"

"Twice. First time I went to the Toledo about ten months ago. Gatti saw me and told me to get to hell out of it fast. Dead unsociable. Keenan came up to my studio later that night and made sure I got out of Glasgow that night. Played up rough. So I got out."

"Why did you come to Glasgow this time?"

He took out his cigarettes. "More dough. I wanted my forty stepped up. An' that Inveraray job had me worried. I got the idea they were trying to give me the brush."

"Why?"

He lit two cigarettes and gave me one. "They got their tip on that load from some other source. I didn't give it. I haven't been near that part of the west coast this year."

I inhaled. "You think they were trying to replace you?"

"I'm dead sure of it, dick. Some other nose was smellin' out that freight. An' I had feelin's about it. They were tryin' to brush me. I read about this Inveraray job in the papers when I was at Callendar."

"So you came down to put the bite on."

"Correct." He spoke through the cigarette-smoke coming from his mouth. "An' Keenan told me they'd beat the hell out of me if I didn't get out of Glasgow and stay out—for keeps. I left the Toledo an' I remembers that newspaper pal of yours—Lamont. I remembered two of his hoods tried to grill me one night when I was juiced in the club. So I contacts him for an outright sale of the lot for five hundred. Then you show on the scene."

"So you never knew where they took the whisky—or what they did with it?"

"Nope. Never did. I got no further than the Toledo an' forty quid a tip."

I overtook a heavy commercial and swung the car back on direction. The rugged skyline of mountains was smoothing out gradually. Hayricks were appearing in the fields. More and more houses wafted past us.

I said, "You think Keenan, Gatti and this guy Ogden were operating the racket on their own?"

"Not on your life! The most Keenan could run is a billiard hall and some local pajunka. Gatti *looks* smart but he couldn't run a street crap game. Ogden's not in the slide-rule."

"Somebody else behind it."

"Sure. Somebody big. With contacts. And dough. There's somebody behind that lot knows what to do with whisky when it's as young as a day-old chick. And whoever it is gets rid of it fast."

We were running through a small town now. Traffic was beginning to show itself. I said, "You got any ideas?"

He looked at me and twisted his lip. "Are you jokin'? If I had ideas about that, would I have asked five hundred for a solo?"

We were driving along the small town's main street, busy with people, cycles, prams, cars, lorries. I stopped at traffic lights. I said, "You want to come into Glasgow?"

"I'd come out in a hearse."

"Where'll I drop you?"

"I'm a poor man."

I reached into my pocket and took out my wallet. I threw it across to him. "Count what's there."

He thumbed his way through my notes. "Twenty-eight."

"Take the twenty. Leave eight. I'll mail you another fifty if you write your address on one of my cards."

He did as I asked. Then he gave me back my wallet. "Okay. You can drop me anywhere on the Edinburgh trunk-road. I can get to Coatbridge by bus from there. Here's the main turning on to the trunk-road now. Before you do that, pull the car to the side. I've got a bonus to give you."

I slowed the car, drew in to the roadside at a quiet part behind a hedge and stopped. I switched off the engine. "Now what?"

He turned his heavy shoulders to face me and spoke in a lower voice. "The way I stand with this outfit now is on my backside.

The only other kind of position I can be in is dead. And if I know this mob, they'll be huntin' all over Scotland for me. I'm out. And I'm hot. They won't stop at givin' me the 'message' if they catch up with me."

"You want police protection?"

He grinned. "Don't be crazy. I'm not *that* stupid. The way I see it is that if you get this whole thing stitched up an' you can put them inside, I'm clear for good. If you don't, an' they're left running' around, sooner or later they'll find me. An' they'll give me it. I know that."

"So?"

"So the quicker you an' the cops get them parcelled up, the longer I breathe an' eat an' sleep."

"You have a point."

He was fumbling among the papers from his inside jacket pocket.

"A month ago I phoned Keenan about a load of grain spirit leavin' a distillery outside Perth. After I gave him all the details, I got the feelin' he wasn't interested. I don't think he even made a note of it. Then he tells me to listen carefully 'cause he's got a job for me. And he gives me the briefing. The more he talks, the more I see that this is *it*, dick! This is the snatch to end *all* whisky snatches."

"Why? What was it?"

He unfolded a dirty piece of foolscape-size paper on his knee and stuffed the other papers back in his pocket. "A train job."

I looked at the paper. There was writing and sketchy drawing done by pencil. "You mean—they were going to stick up a train! In a country this size?"

He grinned. "You think it's dopey? Listen, dick, it's like I said—whoever's running this outfit knows the game." He flattened out the paper. "Look. See this map? I drew it myself. I sent a copy of it by mail to Keenan an' I kept this. You know McDuff?"

"McDuff? That's far north, isn't it?"

"Right up on the north-east coast. What happens at McDuff?"

"Tell me."

"The whole of that area's got more distilleries than there are coffee-shops in London. And around this time of the year these distilleries send their whisky into McDuff for freighting down south by train in one big load. It's a railhead mainly for whisky."

"So you had to get details of that load."

"Right." He grinned. "Minute by minute—mile by mile."

I rubbed my chin. "Just a minute—are you telling me this mob are going to have a throw for that load?"

"I'm telling you just that. I got up to McDuff four weeks ago and it took me five days to get all the information I wanted. It's not such a crazy idea. That train leaves McDuff at midnight on the twenty-eighth of this month. It will have two armed guards and a Revenue man aboard. They'll be positioned this way on the train. . . ." He indicated crosses on a crudely drawn sketch of a railway wagon. "An' there's a driver an' fireman."

"Where does the train stop?"

"This train comes down from the north usin' all the branch-lines and link-ups. It keeps clear of the main lines so that it keeps clear of big towns and cities. Where does it stop?" He grinned. "You know where? It stops only at night in the loneliest parts. I tell you, this thing's been tailor-made for a snatch for years—an' nobody's thought of it."

"Somebody has now."

"An' somebody's going to snatch it. That train takes five days to get to London. It carries half a million pounds' worth of malt whisky. It keeps clear of towns. It stops only at nights in the wildest parts—among the mountains, on the side-lines, or the moors. You get it? It's too easy, shamus. I could do it myself with three hired labourers and a boy."

I pushed my hat slightly back from my forehead. "How did you find all this out?"

"Find it out! They *told* me. They don't make secrets of it. You ask. You're told. Just like that. I nearly did a picture-story on it for *Life*!"

"You think they'll have a try?"

"Certain. They sent me a hundred for that job." He flattened out the paper on his knee. "An' here's where they'll make the try." He drew a dirty forefinger over the map till it stopped at a large cross which said HAER HILL. "That place is exactly five miles north-east of the village of Kilmarchan. I've seen it. The train stops there after midnight—at twelve-fifty. An' it stays there for two hours."

"How's the whisky loaded?"

"In barrels—inside closed wagons."

I said: "But they can't take a load *that* size. How'll they get it away?"

"They won't take the whole load. They couldn't. They'll

probably take two or three wagons' worth and load it in trucks. That's still a bonanza."

"What about the armed guards?"

"They're armed with rifles—two of them. I've shown them on the sketch exactly where they'll be. All they have to do is sap them in the dark when they come off the train. And they *will* come off the train."

I sat back. "Five on the train—two armed."

"Five in the gang—all armed. It's a deal. If anybody on the train gets really troublesome, they'll get the lot. These boys'll use beaters if they have to."

I thought for a while. I toyed with the dangling ignition key. A small van passed up before it slowed to go round the corner on to the main trunk road. I said, "But you don't *know* if they'll try."

"You still want jam on it! Work it out for yourself. I give them dope as detailed as the workings of an atomic bomb. I tell them what colour of eyes the Revenue man has. Keenan tells me to send all this by mail. I do that. They send me a hundred. That train has more whisky on it—and better whisky—than all their truck snatches put together. Work it out, dick."

"Okay," I said. "I'll think about it."

He was silent for a while, watching me. Then he said, "You want me to suggest?"

I grinned. "No. Your problem's easy. You want the heat off."

"That's right. I want a nice, peaceful life." He handed me the foolscap sheet of paper. "It's all yours. Whoever you're workin' for's got his money's worth so far from Charles Scarlie."

"I'll do some thinking."

He opened the car door. "Do that, dick. Fast."

"You did the right thing—tailing me to the hotel today."

He grinned. "I'm just takin' out some life insurance. I just want you to carry the policy."

I started up the engine. "I'll send the dough."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I HAD gone through the newspaper twice and was thinking about the crossword when the sergeant came to the desk and said, "You can go along now, sir. You know the room?"

"Yes, I know it." I folded the paper and went along the corridor.

They were waiting for me. Harry Pollok was eating again—and drinking tea. Rae sat with his hands clasped on the desk. He looked tired.

I shut the door behind me. "Morning."

"Good morning," said Rae. Pollok said nothing.

I took off my hat. "You wanted to see me. I got the message at my hotel."

Rae indicated a chair. "That's right, Daly. We want to see you."

Pollok said, "We don't want to. We have to." He sipped tea.

The snazzy policewoman came in then with two other cups of tea—one for Rae, one for me. I had quite a job concentrating on the tea. When she had gone, Pollok said, "You've been getting around."

I said nothing. I picked up the cup and saucer.

Rae said, "You know somebody called Connelly?"

"Yes."

"He's in hospital. He was picked up half-dead night before last from a shop doorway in Eastholme Street. You know anything about it?"

I sipped tea. "D'you mean—did I beat him up?"

Rae's hard blue eyes were fixed quite steadily on me. "If we thought that we'd have arrested you. What's your connection with Connelly? How did you know him?"

I laid the cup and saucer on Rae's table. "Must I answer this?"

"No," Pollok said. "You needn't help the police at all."

I rose and picked up my hat. "Okay. I won't."

"Just a minute!" Rae's voice was harsh and level. "Sit down and listen to me, Daly." I sat down and he continued, "I don't know what you've got in that head of yours. I'm only reading what I see and hear. But my guess is that you've been in business as a private investigator too long to play this game. We're both of us investigating the same thing—you and the police—the wholesale theft of bulk whisky. The fact that your client Henry Calling-way gets impatient with the official police inquiries and engages you doesn't entitle you to dodge your responsibilities as a citizen."

I sat back. I felt cold. "What you're trying to say, Detective-Inspector Rae, is that any evidence I find in this case should be handed over to you. Any you find is your own property. Now you listen to me, friend Rae. I've only been on this case a week and during that time I've risked my neck, taken a beating, risked being

arrested, paid out nearly two hundred pounds of my client's money for information. If you think I'm going to skip along here whenever you blow the whistle, and present you with a full dossier of that gen which you should've dug out yourself, you've got a hole in your head!"

There was a long silence. Somewhere in that stuffy little office there was a small clock ticking. I could even hear a tramcar hammering on the rails along at Edmonston Cross.

Pollok said, "It happens every time. It was the same last time you came to Glasgow."

I said, "It'll be the same *any* time I come here so long as you guys reach for the thumbscrews the minute I walk in."

Rae said, "That's a bit of theatrical hoo-hah, Daly—and you know it. Nobody in the police is trying to victimize you. All we're doing is the job we're paid to do—and that includes stopping private detectives stirring up hell among small-time crooks so that one of them's half-killed."

"Look, Rae," I said, "I'm nearly there. Will you leave me alone? If you want me to tell you why I was seeing Syd Connelly, it was mainly because you guys didn't. If you want me to tell you how he landed in hospital, I don't know—but it's a bet a guy called Keenan, who owns the Toledo Billiard Saloon, put him there. If that's why you called me down, that's it. But if you want me to report here twice daily with all the evidence I gather in this job you're not on." I stood up to go.

Rae sighed. "I don't know—maybe it's the Canadian in you, Daly. Every time a client hires you to do something, you seem to consider the whole case is your private property."

"That's just what it is—my private property—and my client's."

"Not when it's a public crime."

"The public's had its chance—through you."

"And we're still working on it."

"I'm not impressed."

Rae sighed again. He stroked his bald head. When he spoke his voice was lower, softer. "We're quarrelling again, Daly."

"That's right. We're quarrelling. It's not the Canadian in me, Mr. Rae. It's the democrat."

He smiled. "All right. Now let's get reasonable. You've got a job to do. So've we. Just please tell me why you were seeing Syd Connelly."

"You know the Toledo?"

Pollock picked up a pasteboard folder and held it up. "Toledo."

"Okay," I said. "You'll know Keenan. I didn't—although he and a guy called Gatti tried to beat me up two nights previous. I went to the Toledo as a result of a phone call I traced. I met Connelly. I played him up on fake snooker then paid him to tell me about Keenan and Gatti."

"Did he know much?" asked Pollok.

I shook my head. "Not much—just that Keenan owned the place and operated protection and a few other back-street rackets." I shrugged. "He told me all I wanted—just that."

"How did you trace the phone call?" asked Rae.

"From a hotel in Fort William."

They exchanged looks. Rae said: "I'll say this, Daly. Calling-way's getting his money's worth."

"Can you tell *me* something?"

"I'll try." He grinned. "We're democratic, too."

"Do you suspect anyone we know of running this whisky racket?"

He ran his finger along the edge of a file. "Yes. We do." He looked at Pollok.

I waited. Nothing further. Then I said, "Who?"

Rae sat back. "Mrs. Kelso."

I leaned my elbows on my knees. "It has its points. She knows more than most women about whisky. She's been a director in an agency that handles four big accounts. One theory could be that she killed her husband because he found out."

Pollok said: "We checked on Kelso's trip to London. He left for London at noon on the Tuesday. He leaves London again Wednesday morning on a flight at 7.25. Gets into Glasgow 9.30."

I said, "Next he appears at that hotel up north, pours four gins down his throat, has a snack and tears out like an air-to-air rocket."

"How d'you know that?" asked Pollok.

"Anderson told me. I got it first from his barman."

Pollok leaned forward. "That means that Kelso probably went up to their bungalow, saw Mrs. Kelso there, then came down to the hotel with her."

Rae said: "This begins to hold some water. What was Mrs. Kelso doing in the bungalow by herself?"

"She wasn't," I said. "She was with someone."

They looked at me.

I continued. "She was with a man."

Pollok stood up. He said nothing for a while, then, "That holds gallons of water!"

Rae said, "Go on, Daly." He was watching me with fixed, steady eyes.

"You tell me who the man was," I said.

"Could it have been Callingway?"

I said: "It could have been anyone, even Anderson. It might even have been you, Harry."

Pollok sat down, scowling.

I went on: "That all fits. Kelso returned from London in a hurry, comes to the hotel, tops up with gin, goes to the bungalow, returns to the hotel with his wife, love and kisses, goes fishing, gets"—I paused—"murdered."

Pollok said: "I said I was *unhappy* with the inquest verdict. I didn't say anything about murder."

"What made you unhappy about the verdict, Harry?" I asked.

He shrugged. "You know. Same kinda feelings as you had. The range of young Seton's gun, the level he was firing at. Things like that. You have to be mighty close to a duck-gun before it blows half your head off."

I put my hand in my pocket and drew out my car keys. "In the boot of my car there's the gun that killed Kelso—a Cumberland, identical model to Seton's." I held up the keys. "You want to send somebody out for it? It's wrapped in green cloth."

Both stood up immediately. Pollok almost ran round his desk. "I'll get it myself." He grabbed my keys and his hat and hurried out.

Rae sat down slowly. His voice was quite hushed. "Where did you find this?"

"Stuck in the mud in the river bed a few yards from where Kelso was shot. That's where I *found* it. I picked it up somewhere else—in Margo Kelso's bungalow."

He rubbed his face slowly. "How . . . !" He screwed his face in exasperation as he drew his hand over it. "Daly, you . . . "

"I know. The evidence doesn't mean a thing because I broke into the bungalow and took it."

"Why the hell didn't you get the Gilfillan police on it while it was in the river?"

I grinned. "With Margo Kelso standing over me when I found it?"

He sighed. "What do I do with it? You see where it places us? We can't even use it now to reopen the case. Daly, there are

times when I think thumbscrews are not a bad idea for private detectives."

The door opened and Pollok came in carrying the gun wrapped in the green baize I had put round it. Silently, he unwound the baize on Rae's desk and expertly revealed the gun without touching it. It was still soiled along the butt with flaked, dried mud. He looked at Rae and pursed his lips. "Now we *can* arrest him."

"Who?" asked Rae.

"Daly."

"I've just told him it's what we'd like to do."

Pollok took another look at the gun before going behind his desk again. He bawled: "I'd put you on the *rack* for this, Daly! D'you realize——"

"Stop howling, Polly," I said. "Listen. Get it through to the lab right away. That's why I brought it here. Check it for finger-prints, although you probably won't find any. Even if you do, you'll probably have no known suspect on which to compare them. But let me know if there *are* any. Then keep the gun against any future evidence I might bring in."

"Right, sir," said Pollok. "Anything else, sir? Just ring if you want coffee, sir."

Rae's finger was on the intercom.

I grinned. "Relax, Polly. I've just one mail-order lesson to take from the detective school, then I'll get my ginger moustache and solve it all."

"You'll——" Pollok cut short on a gulp of anger as a uniformed cop opened the door.

Rae said: "Take this gun to lab, Kelly. Check it for prints or markings."

"Right, sir." The cop carried the rifle carefully in the baize and went out.

I got up and toyed with the brim of my hat.

"You'll let me know"—I looked towards the door—"if there's any print."

Rae was glaring at me. "I could take you inside now, Daly—with the happiest will in the world!"

I fingered my hat. "Give me a week."

"I'd give'm two years!" said Pollok.

"A week," I said. "At the most. I'm nearly there." I opened the door behind me and nodded as I went out.

There were two decided improvements in the front office of Graham and Connolly. The girl on the high stool was now wearing a beige dress that suited her much better, and the bald-headed man with spectacles on his nose knew me. He even crinkled his face into something that had the memory of a smile.

Graham got up and shook hands when I came into the room. Callingway sat in his chair and nodded. He was smoking a cigar. "Morning, Daly."

"Morning," I took off my hat.

"I'm glad you got along, Mr. Daly—especially when Mr. Callingway's here. That's why I phoned your hotel."

Callingway looked at his cigar, coughed and said: "Straight to the point, Daly. No messing about. The Committee're demanding results."

I sat down. "What kind of results?"

"Well, dammit. . . ." He gestured with his cigar as he gathered words. "Results. Been a week at it. Graham here's lost fifteen thousand. . . . Not a damn thing. We're as much in the dark as ever. Stuff's gone—just gone!"

Graham offered me a cigarette. "What Callingway's worried about, Daly, more than anything else, is that the Association Committee just don't see or hear or know about any developments in the case."

I took the cigarette and lit it. "I don't employ a public relations man."

Callingway patted the desk in agitation. "That's what's wrong more than anything else, Daly. Relations. We just don't hear a word from you. You go here, go there. You came into my hotel on Saturday night and asked me to find five hundred pounds so that you could buy some information from someone. What happens? Your informant doesn't turn up. No explanation from you. I have to rush off to London that night. When I return—you've gone up north."

I said nothing.

Graham tried to translate pleasantly, calmly. "I'm being quite plain about it—I'm disappointed you didn't make more investigation of my own loss at Inveraray. I think I said so the other day. But that's *my* only complaint. I'm leaving it to Callingway and the Committee to raise the general one."

I waited on Callingway raising the general one. He raised hell.

"I want a full report, Daly—a full report on what you've dis-

covered so far about this case. My Committee want to know what's happening. I've seen them twice and I'm fed up telling them you're still on the job. I think it's the least you owe us so far—a complete report. And that's why I asked you here today."

I listened to him carefully. I watched every movement and expression on his tanned, ruddy face, every dilation of his thick neck.

Graham said: "Look, Daly, you must understand we've all of us got the shivers about this whisky stealing. It was my turn a few days ago. Callingway's before that. Who's next? I quite appreciate you're probably working hard on this case—in spite of the fact you haven't been to my own place yet. Nobody suggests you're slacking on the job. But the situation's now critical."

Callingway waved his cigar. "Critical. 'Course it is. Everybody's shaking in their shoes, dammit. Now, that's the position, Daly. Not mincing words. The Committee want a report."

I took my time before I said, "I think I told you when we met at the hotel up north that there was one client I never had—a committee."

"All right, then, dammit—let *me* have your report."

"No."

There was much quietness. In fact, all was quietness. After a time, Graham said: "You're not being very co-operative, Daly. All Mr. Callingway wants——"

"I know as well as you what Mr. Callingway wants, Mr. Graham. I'm not an imbecile. I've just told him he can't have it."

The tycoon began to emerge. Callingway drove his cigar-end into the large black ash-tray. He skewered it till it was doused entirely. Then he said, in a slower voice: "Now you listen to me, Daly. I know when I'm asking something reasonable. And I know when I've a right to expect it. And you're going to give me that report."

I got up. "Just before you and your hysterical little committee get around to firing me from the case, I'd like to tell you here and now you're getting no report from me, no bill from me, no expenses, no love—no nothin'!"

Graham said: "Listen, Daly—all we're asking is a sensible résumé of what you've found out for us. That's what we hired you to do—find out for us!"

"You're wrong, Mr. Graham. You didn't hire me to find out anything for you. You hired me to stop a racket."

"Stop the racket!" said Callingway. "We don't even know what it *is*, yet! Daly, as far as I'm concerned, you can come off this case right away."

I put on my hat. "You couldn't drag me off this case with a hydraulic winch, Mr. Callingway. I'm on this bus till the end of the line."

He was cold. "You can send me your bill up to date."

I went to the door. "I wouldn't send you the measles."

I shut the door behind me.

After I paid off the taxi-driver, I had to stop on the pavement for a few minutes and tell myself that the road to disaster was a fast one. So I slowed up. I took three deep breaths, put my hands in my raincoat pockets and walked into the hotel easily and calmly.

Farquhar was sitting in a chair over in the corner. He rose and smiled through his spectacles. "They told me you'd be back about now. So I waited."

We shook hands. I said, "Come up to my room." I just knew he wanted to talk. Many people would want to do many things now—weep, laugh, bawl. Farquhar wanted to talk.

We talked about the weather on the way up in the elevator. He held his hat in his hand and smiled most of the time. It was only when you looked into the moustached smile you remembered it was a fixture for most situations from designing a half-page ad for tomorrow's copy date to talking about the weather with his boss's potential executioner.

In my room, he put his coat neatly over the end of the bed, placed his hat on top and sat down.

I took off my jacket, rolled up my shirt-sleeves and ran water into the basin. "You been fired, Mr. Farquhar?" I was looking at him in the mirror.

He smiled. "Almost."

I grinned. "Was she mad?"

"She was very angry—very angry." He sat back. "It was my own fault, I suppose. It slipped out. I saw she was depressed and I touched on the subject—I really felt sympathetic about it all. She seemed to realize right away you'd been to see me—especially when I suggested there might have been foul play. I admitted it—and that was that." He looked at me. "I'm afraid I wouldn't make a very good detective, Mr. Daly."

I bathed my face, and was reaching for the towel. "You'd make a good witness. That's better credit."

He was quiet for a time, waiting until I dried my face and hands. When I put on my jacket and sat on the bed, he looked at his fingers, clasped his hands and said, "I'm not very happy, Mr. Daly."

I waited.

He went on: "It's . . . I don't know. There's something funny."

I said nothing.

He looked at his hands, then up at me. "Mr. Kelso went to London to see that research outfit—Manders. He *did* see them. I know that because I phoned them. I don't know how it is—I just can't get it out of my mind. He was down there doing something with our *whisky* advertising. Then he came back up here, didn't come to the office. And the next thing we hear is that he's dead."

I leaned my weight on one elbow on the bed. "This research firm—why was he seeing them?"

"I don't know. I've gone through the files and there's correspondence there, certainly, but it's all quite normal stuff. About a survey of whisky being taken in London for eighteen different brands of whisky."

"What kind of survey?"

"Well, I suppose—a survey of sales, or whisky-drinking habits. Who drinks what. And why."

"What kind of correspondence?"

He accepted my cigarette. "It's one of these bulk mass-observation jobs. You know the kind of thing. A market research company offers to interview five hundred people of certain specified income-groups. A market sample, we call it. Before they do the job, they ask a few manufacturers in the same kind of business if they want to join the band-wagon and buy the analyses when it's completed. In that way the cost is shared and the research outfit are sure of their expenses before they start."

I lit our cigarettes. "And this Manders firm were offering a seat on the band-wagon to Mr. Kelso?"

"Yes—for his whisky clients." He fitted his cigarette into a black holder. "That's all the letters we have on the subject. Until I phoned them I couldn't find any record of Kelso accepting or refusing the offer—or even referring it to his clients."

"What did they tell you when you phoned?"

He inhaled cigarette-smoke thoughtfully and blinked at me. "This is the bit that's worrying me. They say we *did* accept the offer. They have Kelso's letter of acceptance. They don't know why he came to see them. He was only with them twenty minutes or so, talked about the survey, then left them."

"What would this survey show?"

"Just what I said—who buys what, and why."

"Have you got the results of it?"

He looked at his cigarette. "I haven't. But Manders say it was sent to the office."

"Yet you didn't get it?"

"No—not personally. Probably Mrs. Kelso did." He looked at me.

I thought for a while. "I see." Then a few seconds later I asked: "Why would she want it that way? I mean—without telling you?"

"That's what's bothering me."

"Couldn't you get another copy?"

"Yes, and I've asked Manders for one. They're not too eager to throw copies around, y'know. It's a very confidential business—confined only to the eighteen subscribers. However, I told them the truth as I knew it—that our agency simply hadn't received a copy. So they said they'd send me another—registered post."

"Does Mrs. Kelso know this?"

"No."

I straightened up from my leaning position on the bed. "What do you expect to see?"

He blinked at me through his spectacles. "I haven't an idea in the world. I'll get it tomorrow afternoon by registered mail."

"What could you see?"

He held out his hands. "Anything. Anything in the world about whisky-drinking habits in London—and about eighteen different brands. Maybe I'll see that children under ten drink two large ones before going to school! I don't know—I just don't know."

"How valid is this research stuff?"

He smiled. "All my clients ask that. I'll tell you what I tell them. The principle of market research is that what is true of five hundred people could be true of five million—if your sample is correctly balanced."

"That sounds out of the book." I stood up and walked about the room. "They won't tell you by phone?"

"They couldn't unless they read the whole thing. And there's twenty-two pages of it. They wouldn't know what particular information I want. I don't know myself."

"Will you let me know what you see when you get it?"

He got up. "Right away." He fingered his hat. "Maybe I'm barking up a tree here." He shrugged. "I don't know."

"You're barking up the right one." I helped him on with his coat. "This report is one of the reasons why Kelso was killed."

"You think so?" He looked at me.

I opened the door. "I'm certain of it." I paused. "Tell me—would Mr. Callingway's whisky be in that survey?"

"Callingway's. Oh yes—certain to be."

The telephone was ringing as I closed the door on Farquhar. As I walked over to the instrument, I was thinking how fast things would happen now. My telephone would ring, telephones would be ringing from here to hell from now on.

I picked up the receiver. "Yes?"

"Mr. Daly?"

"Yes."

"Seton speaking—from Mellion Bay."

I sat on the bed. "Yes, Mr. Seton?"

"You told me to phone you—if I felt I wanted to speak to you."

"That's right."

"I—I thought of something. Sir George thought I should phone you about it. It's about that gun."

I waited. "Yes?"

"You said you'd found another gun—a Cumberland. And you think *that* was the one that killed Kelso."

"I'm sure of it."

"Well, I—I don't know . . . we were thinking . . . if that's the case, it means the killer must have known *I* was using a Cumberland."

"That's right. The pellets coincided."

"And Sir George and I were going over our time-table as it were, for that day. You know—to see if there was anyone who would know we were using—Cumberlands."

I looked at my hand clutching the bed-cover like a tensed claw.
"Yes?"

"And the only thing I can think of is the Crosskeys. It's a pub. I went in there for a beer in the afternoon. I had my gun with me—Sir George and I had been at it most of the day. He went to the

house to arrange a meal and I went for a beer. You know the Crosskeys?"

"No. Where is it?"

"Just outside the village—at the north end. About half a mile over the moor from where we were standing yesterday by the river."

"Go on."

"Anyway, I got into the public bar. There were four or five people there at the time. Usual type—two road workers, I remember. And three other men. One of the men saw my gun and got into talk about guns."

I ran my open hand like a hard talon over the bedclothes. "Describe him."

"I've only a hazy memory, mind you. Wore a tweed cap—brown, I think. Nice chap. About forty. Knew quite a lot about guns. Quite knowledgeable bloke."

I held my breath.

He went on: "Spoke with a Scotch voice—not too Scotch. You know—just the accent."

I tried to sound calm. "Slim or fat?"

"Oh—pretty normal. Well built."

I found I was breathing hard. "Clean-shaven or——"

"Oh, no. Moustache—small dark moustache."

I felt my insides avalanche. I shut my eyes.

"... and spectacles. Rimless spectacles." He paused. "That mean anything to you?"

I opened my eyes. I almost shouted. "Not a bloody thing!"

Silence. I heard Seton say quietly: "Oh, I say.... Sorry about that."

I drew my hand over my face. "Sorry I shouted, Seton. I . . . thought you had something I . . . recognized."

"Anyway, I thought I'd tell you about it."

"Sure." I found myself grinning for no reason I could think of. "Sure. You did the right thing." I thought of something. "You were showing this character the gun?"

"Yes—you know. Just interest."

"The other people in the bar would see you? Were they interested?"

"Oh, yes. All except the roadmen. They were over in the corner."

I said, "It means you showed the gun as a Cumberland to . . . how many?"

"Three—including that bloke. And the barman."

I said nothing. I was thinking.

He said, "These were the only people that day who would know I was using a Cumberland."

"You said you would be shooting that evening?"

"Oh, yes. Told this bloke exactly where."

"The others would hear you?"

"Bound to."

"You can't remember the others—to describe?"

"Not a hope, Mr. Daly. You know how it is—you just know they're there. I was only in the place for twenty minutes."

I punched the bed. "Okay. Thanks, Seton. It was good of you to phone."

"I hope it helps."

"I hope so." I hung up.

I sat on the edge of the bed thinking for a long time before my stomach told me I'd had no lunch. I looked at my watch. It was two-forty-five.

I put on my raincoat and hat and went to the door. Then I turned and picked up the telephone and asked for Dick Lamont at the *Dispatch*.

While I waited on the call coming through I went to the window and looked out at the city. I looked at the ant-like figures hurrying around the entrance to Central Station, the cars crawling in a solid mass along Gordon Street to the traffic lights, the newsboys, the doorman at the Café D'or, the taxis in a queue outside the station, the people hurrying along in the cold wind. I looked beyond Hope Street Corner over the rooftops—miles and miles of them—to where the buildings and smoking chimneys disappear in a haze. There's a clue to every crime in Europe in Glasgow. I thought if I heard that corny saying again I would scream.

The telephone rang. It was Mavis.

"Hello, Mavis Sangster."

"Miss Sangster." She sounded cool.

"Why?"

"I keep Mavis for the people who matter."

"Don't I matter, Miss Sangster?"

"Not consistently."

I grinned. "I've been busy. You know—busy."

"Consistently."

I fingered my ear. "You sound—cool."

"I don't feel exactly like a red-hot momma."

"Have you had lunch?"

"Yes—two hours ago."

"I don't suppose you've had dinner as well?"

"I had—last night."

I sat down. "Could you dine with me tonight?"

"I could. I haven't a thing dated—not a thing. I could. I could dine with anyone sober and honest."

"I'm honest."

She sighed. "Where've you been? Why didn't you phone or something?"

"I've been busy."

"I came in at this point."

"I'm coming round to see Dick in ten minutes. It's a long wait till I dine with you by candlelight. Could you rig a couple of sandwiches and coffee?"

"D'you want English or French arsenic on them?"

"Please—I'm hollow."

"I know that." She hung up.

When I opened the door I saw Dick's feet on his two-mile black desk. The rest of him was behind a fresh edition of the *Dispatch*. A steaming jug of coffee, cups and saucers and a plate of sandwiches were over at the corner of the desk.

He folded the newspaper and put his feet on the floor. "How's the investigation, Ken?"

I took off my hat and sat down. "I've been fired."

Dick moved the coffee and sandwiches over to me. "Calling-way's fired you?"

I nodded. "We parted the best of pie-slingers this morning—with hard feelings. I refused to give him an up-to-date report with a list of my tramcar fares."

Dick poured coffee in the cups. "Committees give me the heebies."

"The usual yatter—no action, can't see what they're getting for their money, no fresh evidence, no arrests." I sighed. "I'll say this for him—he had the decency to be nasty about it."

"What happens now?"

"I got a new client—on the same case."

"Who?"

"Me." I ate a sandwich.

Dick grinned. "I tried that, Ken. It's a helluva lonely life."

"Sure."

"You look in earnest, too."

"It's a good sandwich."

"I mean—about flying solo."

I drank some coffee. "I'm in earnest, Dick. And I'm nearly there. I'm not letting this baby go—it's getting too interesting. You know the Kelso shooting accident up at Mellion Bay?"

"Yes."

"It was murder. That's tied in with it. His wife's tied in with it. Everybody's tied in with it. I promised you an exclusive, Dick, when this thing blew and, believe me, I'm just feeling around now for the right switch-lever."

"Can't I do something with it now?"

I shook my head. "Not a chance. Not enough evidence yet. And I've told you, I'm still groping around for the right switch to pull."

"I hope you find it. We need something like this. With this outfit, when circulation drops as much as six copies, they blame my department. When it goes up, they give the credit to the crossword puzzle guy."

"Why don't you run a crime department? Then you'd make your own news."

The door opened and Mavis came in. She lifted the coffee jug, saw it empty and took it away. I said, "Thanks for the sandwiches, Miss Sangster, Mavis, Your Highness, Ma'am."

She said nothing as she went out.

Dick said: "She either likes you, or she doesn't. That's Mavis."

I grinned. "She asked me to dine with her this evening."

"I bet she did." He sat back. "When can I come in on the story, Ken—seriously?"

"I don't know. If my nose is any guide, I'm nearly there. I know the set-up roughly but I don't know who the brain is. I know how they steal the whisky but I don't know what they do with it. I know Kelso was murdered but I don't know who did it."

"I suppose you've got ideas?"

"Plenty. One of them keeps sticking up in front of my nose but I can't get it to fit yet. Scarlie trailed me up north and I drove him back to Glasgow. He told me all his part of it. He served them as a look-out man for nearly two years—telling them where the whisky was, when it was travelling, how to get it."

"But surely they didn't steal *every* load he told them about?"

"No. About one in five."

"That looks as if they were blending it in some crude way."

"Could be. That points to somebody who knows whisky." I rose. "Anyway, here's why I came in." I took out a little slip of paper from my pocket and read aloud a map reference. "Make a note of that, Dick." I watched him as he did so. "That's where I'm going tomorrow. In case it's the point of no return."

"Where is it?"

"Beyond Inverness by about forty miles. If there's any unexplored territory in Scotland, I reckon that's it—by the look of the map. It's lucky to be charted."

Dick closed his scribbling-pad. "Okay. At least *I* know which way your dog-team headed if you don't come back. What's doing?"

"I don't know yet. If Scarlie's right, they're going to try a train job."

He raised his eyebrows. "A train job! And what're you going to do?"

"Watch them."

"Then what?"

I shrugged. "Play it off the cuff."

"You're barmy, Ken. These whisky trains are armed around this time of the year. They'll be shooting it out." He walked round the desk. "Look, Ken—let me come with you!"

"Nothing doing."

"I'll promise—not a word till you say so. I'll just stick around with you."

I shook my head. "I promised you an exclusive if and when I clear this case. Be reasonable. I haven't even *started* yet. If Scarlie's right, this'll be the first time I've seen anything of the racket outside a newspaper cutting."

"Maybe Scarlie's trying to lay a trap for you. He's a deadbeat, Ken. I wouldn't trust him the length of this desk."

"Neither would I. But he's all I've got. Nobody else has even got so far as to *try* and sell me a bad steer. If he's wrong, I'll come back right away. If it's a trap of some kind to get rid of me, I'll feel honoured. If he's right, I'm in—and this time I *stay* in to the end."

He leaned on the desk. "You told the law?"

I shook my head. "It would be too complicated. Who's Scarlie? Where did I meet him? Can we arrest him? No, Dick. This is a solo fight."

"Keep my story warm, anyway." He grinned.

"Sure."

I went out.

I had dinner with Mavis. With candles. It was very, very nice.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I TOOK out my torch and checked the map again. Haer Hill—five miles north-east of Kilmarchan, at the junction of the Inverness-Edinburgh trunk road and a by-lane leading to Sandnewton Farm. I peered through the car windscreen and tried to see in the darkness.

I opened the car door and got out. There was only a slight wind but it carried something nasty and cold from the north-east that cut through my heavy coat and made me shudder. I could hear the wind moaning across the dark moor.

I walked along the deserted road to the junction and looked around in the blackness for some sign. There was none. Only blackness. I got back to the car, went in, started up the engine and turned down the little road. I kept only my sidelights on.

It was a very narrow road. Whoever put it on the ordnance map at all must have been an optimistic local. The Romans or General Wade were probably the last to re-pave it—and they probably did it with a mixture of granite rock and clay. The rock was still here. I couldn't see it but only a surface like a stone-quarry face could hammer me around like this.

About three miles later the road ran under a little stone railway bridge and I stopped just beyond it. I switched on my torch again and looked at the map. I traced the railway line with my finger along to where I had marked a cross at a spot which lay fifty yards from this little railway bridge. I took back what I was thinking about the ordnance cartographers.

I got out of the car and held my hat against the cold wind. It was worse down here. I looked about but could see nothing but miles and miles of night. I shut my eyes to try and get them used to the darkness and I opened them after a while. Now I could see at least the dark skyline against the moor. I walked along the rough road till my feet touched grass, then I walked on the grass and on to the moor.

The wind moaned bleakly. I could hear it hissing quietly through the bracken and heather at my feet. I stumbled over the uneven gorse and plodded on into the night.

I stopped and listened. Very faintly—from the direction I had come—I thought I heard a noise—like a motor engine. I listened again. Then I turned round quickly and ran back towards the direction of my car. I fell in the heather; I got up and ran, ran against the cold wind. My feet were clattering on the stony roadway before I realized the distance. I saw the lights of my car. I wrenches the door open and, panting, felt desperately along the dashboard for my light switch. I turned off the sidelights. Then I got in, switched on the engine, battered the gear in and accelerated. I drove the car blindly for the moor and held the steering-wheel as it shot into the darkness. I was thrown violently all over the seat but I held that steering-wheel like a vice. Any time now I was about to find out what I should have found out before—whether there were any ravines or deep valleys. A floating feeling would tell me lots. But I kept the car going and Daly's good fairy kept behind the wheel. The deepest dip was one that nearly brained me on the roof of the car.

I stopped the car and switched off the engine. I was still panting and I tried to remember all the things about cool heads and what private dicks get employed for. It wouldn't work so I let all the gasp suit itself as I opened the door and stood on the moor. I listened.

I had been right. I could hear the sounds quite clearly now and they were coming from truck engines—approaching from somewhere over there in the blackness, over where the little railway bridge was. That meant there were trucks coming down the by-road. I felt glad I wasn't driving one of them.

I went into the car and unlocked the dashboard glove compartment. I took out a large flask of Scotch, unscrewed it and drank a lot—a good lot. When I replaced it, I felt around and took out a Colt .48 automatic which I slipped into my coat pocket. Then I shut the car door quietly, locked it and walked through the dark towards the roadway.

I could hear the first truck grind under the railway bridge. It had no lights and it was a long time before I even saw its shape against the night sky. It stopped about a hundred yards further on than where my car had been. The cab door opened and someone got out. I lay down on the damp bracken.

There were two other trucks. They drew up behind the first one

and I saw figures get out. I tried very hard to count them but the nearest guess I could get was five. A car's engine sounded in the distance over to my left and I heard it approach—nearer and nearer. No lights. Its brakes squealed quietly as it stopped behind the trucks. A figure got out and joined the others.

I waited. I looked at my watch and saw it was three minutes to one. I sat down and wished I had taken all the Scotch with me. I thought that anybody who could think of a better way of drinking Scotch than on a Highland moor on a winter night deserved a distillery to himself. I licked my lips and thought of going back to the car. I decided against it. Through the wind I could hear the distant chugging of a railway train.

I couldn't see the figures now—only the black outline of the vehicles—nor could I hear anything but the hissing moan of the wind. I felt the sting of cold, icy sleet on my face.

I walked forward towards the vehicles and stopped about thirty yards from them, then lay down on the heather. I still could see no one; the vehicles looked as if they had been abandoned. I rose and stumbled quickly away, walking round in a wide detour, then going in the direction of the railway line.

I heard the train clearly now long before I saw the gleam of the firebox on the footplate. It was a goods train, chugging and clanking steadily along the flat, wind-swept plain. It slackened speed and slowly clink-clink-clinked to a standstill near where I was standing. I could hear the constant hiss of escaping steam. There were only two sounds—that steam and the wind.

Minutes passed. I propped myself on my elbows and listened. The coldness fluffed through the gorse at my ears; it went straight through my damp clothes. The steam was still hissing from the locomotive.

Suddenly I heard voices. There was a shout from the rear of the train then the cry cut short in the wind. Silence again.

There was a thudding of running footsteps coming in my direction. I lay down flat and buried my face in the wet, scratching heather. The thudding passed close to me; I stopped breathing. The footsteps went on into the night.

One of the lorries started up. I raised myself and saw its shape lumbering and trundling slowly over to the train where it reversed and backed up to the first freight car. The steel doors of the car were grinding open and within seconds I heard the soft, deep rolling noise of barrels.

Then the other two lorries came over to the freight cars; doors were opened; barrels were rolled.

I got up and, half-crouching, walked over to the train. I was now within twenty yards of the first lorry. I heard voices against the wind. I stopped.

"How many?"

"Eight."

"Another four."

I heard the sound of the car's engine behind me and I ran away from its noise. The car stopped alongside the train and although I lay down and listened I could hear nothing.

Later the car started up again and I saw its shape make for the road. It kept going and I heard its sound disappear in the distance.

The first lorry drew away slowly from the train and stopped over by the edge of the moor.

I ran over the moor in the darkness towards its shape. It was an Army-type, canvas-covered truck and rear tarpaulins were flapping in the wind. I jumped up on the tailboard and slithered, clambered up till my body poised on top. Then I stumbled down inside the lorry and lay down, gasping, on top of the barrels in the blackness.

I heard the other two trucks lumbering in low gear over the heather. They stopped behind this one, three engines throbbing. Footsteps padded on the roadway . . . a mumble of voices . . . I heard someone clambering on the tailboard of my lorry. One-inch thickness of wood separated me from someone who was breathing like a horse. I could hear him grunting as he did something with the canvas flaps. I heard the sound of tightening ropes and I lay down flat. My heart was hammering. When I opened my eyes all was even blacker than before. I couldn't even see the whitewashed top discs of the barrels now.

I heard the engine start up . . . gears engage . . . I was jerked as the vehicle moved off.

The first thing that soothed me was the smell—the rich, lovely, maltish-winsh stench of liquor. And I needed soothing. The lorry roared under the little railway bridge and went at hell's pace up that rocky road. I was jerked and thrown and jostled on top of barrels that were swaying like giant skittles. I tried to lie on them all ways but every way I turned seemed worse. There was no space to crouch down between the barrels and in any case that idea sounded better than it looked. Two of these barrels colliding

reminded me of a nut-cracker. I decided to stay on top.

I couldn't tell how long the gymnastics lasted. I was still gasping when I felt the lorry turn, and—ah! velvet paradise!—we were on the main road which was smooth, smooth. I heard the driver change gears, then we roared through the night along the highway.

There were times during that trip when I thought I must have died on that moor—and this was me now in Hell, a special Hell for private eyes. It had all the signs. My clothes were soaking through; I was rumbled and tossed on top of these swaying, lip-edged barrels; it was icy cold; I was numb. And I was beginning to feel sick with the whisky smell. I felt surer than ever that this was a special kind of Investigator's Inferno.

I managed to look at my watch during one slowdown. It said five minutes past two. I heaved myself up, holding on to the inside of the tailboard and looked out through the slit in the canvas. There was nothing behind—only the dark, wet roadway, the shape of hills, the night sky and a few trees. I straightened my legs and tried to stretch my body.

Two hours passed. I nearly went mad.

I felt the lorry slowing. Then it stopped. I heard a noise as if a small gate was opening.

"You made it?" The voice was throaty, rough.

"We the first?"

"Second. Charlie's in."

There was the sound of very large gates being opened. They squealed slightly. The motor started up again and the lorry moved slowly.

If I imagined I had felt the corrugations of some of Scotland's worse roads that night, I must have been dreaming. Whatever we rode on now beat everything between here and Tibet. Twice I was knocked right off the barrels to slither half-way down between their crushing bulks. Twice I climbed on top again. The agony went on and on....

I was sobbing and gasping to recover my breath when the lorry stopped. Then the engine stopped and all was silent except the low moan of the wind.

More voices.

"Charlie in?"

"Yeh." This voice from the ground was gravelly, husky. I thought I recognized it as Keenan's. I remembered that tone in

Scarlie's dingy flat the night I beat it up with him and Gatti.

Pause.

"Whaja get?"

"Twelve each."

"No trouble?"

"Nup. Dick had to slug one of the guards. Got funny."

"You dump 'em?"

"Benjy's taken 'em. He'll dump 'em somewherees."

"Okay. Let's start."

"I want some grub."

"Boss's on his way. Doc wants to start now."

"I'm gettin' some grub!"

"Okay. I'll start unloading."

I thought fast. I heard Number Two begin to untie the ropes and I thought faster. I crouched down behind the inside of the tailboard as I heard Number One's footsteps walk away, a door shut. The canvas flaps parted and as the rope unloosened, they were drawn right back. Even the dull, black night was a light relief to the darkness of inside the lorry.

I heard him climb up by the tailboard step. I looked up and saw his head and shoulders silhouetted against the night sky. He was bending over to unhook the tailboard fixtures when I let him have it. The impact of his chin made my whole arm ache. He groaned once and slumped. I caught him and with a terrific effort I hauled his slack, heavy body over the tailboard and into the lorry.

I rose and looked out. After hours of darkness my eyes could see reasonably well. We were in a courtyard of some kind. It was deserted. I climbed quietly over the tailboard and dropped to the ground. I ran round the side of the lorry, crouched in its darkness and looked about. I was alive. I ran as quietly as possible to the end of a building and into the night. As far as I could hear, no one was following me.

My legs were cramped, tingling, trembling. My clothes were still damp. I found I had my hat in my hand as I ran, stumbled, ran, sprawled, ran on rock, on grass, on rock again.

After a long, long time I stopped, spreadeagled across a hillock of turf, gasping. I lay there for ages, listening. There was the sound of a truck away over to my right. This would be the third lorry. I made a mental note that the car had still to come, then I rose, still a bit weak but feeling a little calmer, and crept carefully over moor-heather and turf.

Where now? I sat down on a tree-trunk and thought it out. Daly, I said, you're in. This is it now. Wherever the hell this place is, it's the place they're taking the whisky—and it looks far, far away from the law. You're out in the blue, Daly.

I fingered my aching wrist. I had let Number Two have the lot from my shoulder down. Two seconds later he'd have had lead into me.

I listened carefully. Nothing. By this time Number Two would be raising all hell. They would know there had been someone in that truck—someone who wasn't there now. They would be looking for him—with torches and toothcombs.

I got up and walked on over the heather. After I had gone a few yards I heard the sound of waves.

The sea! I was at the coast. Was I? Where was this sound coming from? Over to the left. I walked through some bushes, then over a small hill, down a rough path and through a group of trees.

My feet were on soft sand.

Now I could hear the surf—hissing waves bursting on the shore. I walked over the sand down towards the water, but it was much farther than I had thought. Every step brought me nearer the hissing until after a long time I felt the firmer feel of damp sand under my feet.

I stopped and looked over the water. I could see it clearly now. It looked like a loch—a big loch that stretched as far as the dark shape of a mountain which I could just make out through the gloom. I walked on until I came to the edge of the water. Dipping my hand in, I tasted the water. It was fresh. A loch.

I turned and walked up over the sand again towards the tall, straight trees that creaked and groaned in the wintry wind.

When I reached them, I stayed there for ten minutes watching in the direction of the house I had come from. There were no lights. Maybe they were looking for me without flashlights.

A husky voice at my ear said, "Don't move, bub. Just put your hands in the air."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THERE were four of them when I went into the room. It was a big room—looked like the harness-room or workroom of an estate mansion. Over on the left was a huge, old-fashioned fireplace and

in the middle was a long, white, wooden table. The man behind me prodded his gun closer into my back. Then he threw my Colt on to the table and said, "We got company." He pushed his hat farther back on his head. He was a small, burly man. I figured he was the gateman.

One of the four, a big, yellowish-faced tough wearing dungarees, came over to me. He looked vaguely familiar—especially his chin. I remembered it was him I had hit on the lorry tailboard.

"You forgot somethin'. This." He hit me twice—in the stomach then a raker under the jaw that blazed lights through my head. I went down, my head bursting with pain. I felt blood at my mouth. Then I heard a harsh voice, "Leave him." The voice came nearer. "Get up." I lurched up and held on to a chair. "Sit down," said the voice.

I fell into the chair and the mist cleared from before my eyes. The voice sat on the edge of the table. He was small, dark, bald—and he wore a brown warehouse or workshop coat. His lips were thin and his eyes were quick, dark. He had an ugly mole on his forehead.

"What's your name?"

"Marco Polo."

Number Two came over to have another slug, but the small man stopped him with a gesture. I saw Keenan sitting on the edge of the table watching me with his small slit-eyes.

"What's your name?" repeated the bald man levelly.

"Why?"

"You're on private property. You're trespassing. That's why."

Keenan said, "It's a habit. He keeps trespassin'."

"You can be funny standing up. It's easier."

"What's your name?" the voice repeated. "Why are you here? What's your business?"

I said nothing. He looked at me for a few seconds. Without turning round he said, "Anybody recognize him?"

Keenan said, "Sure. He's a shamus. A private dick."

"Who's hired him?" He turned to me. "Who hired you?"

I kept silent.

Keenan said, "He's the guy Scarlie tried to blab to."

I said, "Why don't you ask your boss who I am? He knows me."

That had an effect. They stared at me, undecided about anything now. The bald man said, "Lock him up."

Gatti said, "Lock him up! Are you crazy?"

"Lock him up!" said the little man. "We'll soon place him." Gatti came over to me. He said, "Get up, Sunshine."

I rose.

"Move!"

I walked on through the doorway and out into the courtyard, past the three lorries.

The room smelled of stale vegetables. There were bars on the window and the door looked as if it might be cannon-proof. It even had studs on it.

There was a dirty table and a broken chair. I sat on the chair and took out my damp packet of cigarettes. I tried my lighter and it worked so I started trying to dry out a cigarette. I burned two before I got one worth smoking. It was beautiful. I found I could think much better.

What I knew was this. This bunch of hoodlums were the whisky stealers. This latest haul was probably their biggest—certainly their boldest—from a guarded whisky train. Timed to perfection. I could see that.

The whisky had been taken to this place. What *was* this place? A Highland estate of some kind—complete with country mansion, loch, woods, roads. Whom did it belong to? That bunch? Not likely. Whose was it, then? *Where* was it? I tried to reckon how far I had travelled by first-class barrel-top through the night. We had seemed to be averaging twenty-five miles per hour; we had been travelling three hours. Ergo—we had come seventy-five miles from that cross on my map.

I pounded my brains. I walked up and down trying to remember the little geography I knew about the country. The whisky-haul spot, I knew, lay south of Inverness. So it was likely that this estate would be roughly seventy-five miles south of *that*. That is—if we travelled south. The lorries certainly took the south road at the lane junction.

That would bring the position—where? *Where?* Where the hell was I? I gave up.

Who were these people? The short man in the brown overall-coat looked as if he could think; his voice was cultured. The others looked apes. Where had they come from? They looked as much at home in this Highland estate as a Madison Square Garden fight manager at the ballet. Keenan and Gatti obviously came from Glasgow—that tied in with Syd Connelly's description of them

—slum gangsters. The man in the dungarees sounded Yorkshire. And the gateman—he just sounded animal. He could come from anywhere.

What were they doing with the whisky here? That stuff they took from the train was the real stuff. It was worth a fortune—maybe thirty or forty thousand pounds. (The casks alone were worth a packet.) Would they be blending and maturing it further here? Maybe with a cheaper grain? Highland blended stuff of *that* quality could take almost *any* kind of firewater, lose it without a blush and still be saleable as whisky. That stuff was the whisky base that *makes* whisky!

I looked out of the window and saw the cold, grey daylight dawning. It showed up the cobbled stones of the courtyard, the granite-rock-built house and the three lorries now empty—the barrels gone. I saw something else—a shiny dark-green Janus saloon standing past the lorries. The boss was here.

I heard the key turn in the lock of my door. The door opened and Number Two stood there with a revolver in his hand. I recognized my Colt. He signalled with his head for me to come out. He still wore his dungarees.

I said, "What's wrong, Chubby? Got a message from Garcia?"
"Get out. Boss wants to see you."

I picked up my hat and went out. He waited while I passed him. I walked on ahead.

Suddenly I felt a smash like a ramrod on my rear and I fell, pain shooting through my spine. I crawled up slowly on my knees. He was grinning toothily. "That's a bonus for the slug last night, you Yankee bastard."

I got up painfully and walked on into the house. He kept behind me all the way and told me where to go. "Through that door . . . along this passage . . . now through there . . . keep goin' . . . up these stairs . . ."

As I walked up the stairs I heard sounds—the clinking of glass, a high-pitched hum, occasionally a noise like water from a hosepipe. The sounds became louder and louder. When I got to the top of the stairs there was quite a din of clinking, humming, hissing. I walked along a wide hall which led to a great baronial gallery balustrade illuminated through a glass roof above. This gallery went round all four sides above the huge hall. And it was from this hall below that the noise was coming—echoing right through the balustrades and rooms.

Number Two shouted above the din. "Keep movin'."

I looked down as I passed. The whole plant was there—two huge wooden vats, stainless-steel piping, ducts, conduits, filters, and a simple but effective revolving bottling machine. And it was working. I couldn't see how many men were on the plant. The high-pitched hum was quite clear now. It did things inside my head.

"Down that corridor," shouted Blubber-face. "First door on the right."

I opened the door and went in. It was a very pleasant room decorated mainly in bronze-green and a light, warm ochre. The carpet was ochre—deep, soft and rich. The furniture looked very old, very fine and very shiny; it was deep mahogany. There were flowers in a bowl at the window and the fireplace was white marble. Some very delicate and fine Dresden china pieces were on the mantelpiece.

"Wait here," he said, and shut the door. I heard the key turn. Everything was hushed in silence.

I went over to the window. It was locked in some way and when I looked out I could see that this side of the house was set on a declining hill. Half that drop would break my neck. I decided to have a cigarette. Then I saw another door—probably connection with an adjoining room. I tried it but it was locked.

I waited. Ten minutes passed. Then the key turned and Number Two opened the door.

"Okay. Along here." He still had the gun.

I came out of the room. "Where's the Boss?"

He shut the door behind us. "Why?"

"You said he wanted to see me."

He grinned. "That's right. He saw you."

I worked that one out. The Boss—whatever he was—had been watching me in that room from somewhere. The next room? I said, "Well, you satisfied now that I'm a pal of his?"

"Sure. He recognized you. That's what he said. Look after him, Syd. He's a pal." He was grinning again. "And that's what I'm doin', ain't it?" He moved the revolver towards the gallery. "Along here."

We returned by the same route. This time I did see the operators on the bottling plant. I counted three.

We emerged in the courtyard. As we passed an open door next to my "cell", he shouted, "Hey—Harry!"

There was a distant sound from the darkness which I couldn't hear. Number Two bawled again, "Get the boat out. There's a job Boss wants doin'."

We walked on. The palms of my hands were wet and hot. Nobody likes death—not even guys like me who don't particularly fall in love with life. And this particular kind of burial seemed to me a bit undistinguished by anything—except that I would have my boots on, if this baboon didn't steal them before I was dumped in the loch.

We were at the corner of the stables. I had done it before—often—but this time I threw the dice for double-six. I *had* to win. There would be no second try.

I swung round and did two things at once. I thrashed the gun from his hand with my left fist, and I kicked him in the stomach. He sobbed and doubled up sweetly to let me have a return performance of my hit on the lorry tailboard. This time I nearly dislocated my shoulder. He went down with hardly a groan—and stayed down.

I leapt for the revolver which lay near a drain, grabbed it and ran like mad—straight on, straight ahead for the tall trees and the heather banking beyond. It was a steep banking and although the cover of the trees seemed to close mercifully in behind me, I could only make slow, weakening, gasping progress.

I heard shouting . . . feet running on the cobbled courtyard . . . an oath. . . .

I scrambled up . . . up over the slippery, wet hill, dodging trees, bushes, till, ahead, I could see the light-grey sky.

A revolver shot . . . a whine. . . . They were firing.

I ran on. My legs were feeling like the flippers of a seal. My tweed coat kept hampering me. But I had to keep running. I was clearing the trees now and I couldn't hide. In three seconds I would be a better target than a running Highland stag. I *had* to get over that hill.

I had reached the crest of the hill when they started firing again. One bullet almost singed my coat. The next one would be mine—all for myself. It fired when I was over the hill, and although the name Kenneth Daly was clearly etched on it, it missed me.

I ran down the rough heathery slope towards another copse of trees. I stumbled through the trees and came out at the beginning of a series of rocky ravines and gulches which seemed to be

the way to the foothills of mountains. I staggered gratefully into the shelter of the rocks and, after climbing strenuously for fifteen minutes, I lay behind a huge granite boulder which was overhung with a ledge. I lay, panting, choking for breath, damning my gasps for preventing me hearing anything else. I thought my chest would burst.

I took out the Colt, unfastened the safety-catch and watched the gully, listened, watched, listened. Nothing. Nothing but the fluffing, cold wind.

I lay on my arms behind the rock for a long time—time enough for me to recover strength. Then I rose and started climbing over the rocks, over the heather, over rocks again. All the time I kept watching every direction. Now and then I stopped and scanned the whole hillside. Nothing.

Then the mist came down. It was a lovely mist—grey, cold, wet—and I scooped it with my hands and smeared my face with the wetness. It was a lovely mist.

I kept climbing until I was walking on dark-brown, soggy ground on which sprouted withered, hard, brittle, dead heather. I could see nothing ahead but the white cotton-wool-like vapour. The ground began to slope away down to my right steeply—then very steeply—then very, very steeply. I stopped and clambered back where I had been. I sat down.

That, I thought, could be anything from a gentle dip in the mountain-face to another Grand Canyon. I decided to stay this side of it anyway.

I sat a long time. I smoked one of my last three cigarettes. It tasted like the lining of a sporran. Still there was no sign of the mist clearing and I began to think of all those regular newspaper headlines you see in Scotland—things about mountain climbers with ropes and a ton of implements being lost for days or killed. I thought of my chances with a lounge suit, tweed coat and a pair of suède shoes—all soaking.

After an hour I began to shiver. I got up and decided to climb again. Descending meant anything between running into the gang or getting lost. Ascending probably just meant getting lost. I climbed.

I had been at it nearly half an hour when the mist began to clear. I stopped behind a rock and waited. Almost before my eyes the grey blanket was rolling along and upward till I could see about five yards ahead. Then I saw the black bracken, the green

moss and in a few minutes I was able to see around me quite clearly for about forty yards.

I looked up and saw him come over the edge of the skyline. It was Gatti, his hair streaming over his wet face, his leather jacket glistening. He looked wet, tired. He carried a rifle.

I jumped behind my rock then ran along a steep rocky run to another group of big boulders. It was the worst thing I could have done. He saw me. I heard him shout but I ran on—on, over bracken and stones till I could run behind a large rock. I just made it. A bullet whined over my head as I ducked.

I fired my Colt—more to scare him than anything else. I knew where he was—behind that hillock of heather—and I had to keep him there; I could go no farther. Back behind me was a deep crevice which went down about two hundred feet. I felt sick. To my right were more rocks and a stretch of gorseland.

He fired again and I fired back. Then I thought of something when I saw a large boulder over to my left. I stripped off my overcoat and began filling it with heather madly. I kept looking up over my shelter; I fired once again in reply to his. Then I continued tearing the tough heather and stuffing my coat till it looked really well-filled.

If this came off, it would be the answer to all my troubles. That mist was rising and falling like the best of my horoscopes. It was coming down again.

I fastened the belt of my coat. I took off my hat. Then I crept along to the large, loose stone. It was a big one—about the size of a boy. I tried to move it but it stayed.

I tried again and the loose, thin rubble moved slightly. I gave it another heave with my back strained against another rock. It teetered, then swayed, then overbalanced very slowly till it toppled over into the space of the gully.

I screamed and drew my open hand over my mouth slowly to give the effect of the shriek dying away. Then I threw my stuffed coat and hat over and ran like mad for the rocks to my right. I dived behind them and, even from there, I could hear the big boulder rumbling down the gully, carrying with it other stones and earth and gravel in fading rumbles. I cowered low and carefully watched.

He came up to the gully—twenty yards from me—and crept cautiously towards the edge. I saw him look down. This was the instant that would say if the hoax had been successful. If he

saw no coat—or if he saw a coat obviously faked by stuffing—he would realize I was here, barely twenty yards from him. I put my finger round the trigger of my Colt and held it ready. I didn't want to shoot him. I wanted him to believe my body was in that gully. I knew he couldn't get down to make a close examination. There was just no way down this side.

He stayed there a long time, looking down into the space. He peered. Then I saw him lift the rifle to his shoulder, aim it down into the crevice and fire . . . once . . . twice . . . thrice. He was taking no chances with what he thought might be a wounded private dick. He straightened up, wiped the hair from his forehead and went back over the side of the hill the way he had come.

After a while I tried to rise. I passed out.

I remember lots of things about that walk through the mountains. Most of the time it rained but I was grateful for those dreary, windy sweeps of Highland rain; it was the rain that had brought me round to consciousness.

Now I had no coat, no hat, no cigarettes, no food. It was nice and dramatic—like one of those film epics of *The Lost Race* or the *Gold Rush* or a documentary about *Winter in Tibet*. At one time I again thought I was dead and this time this was me on the moon.

The only thing each brow of hill brought me was another hill, another chasm, another bog. Every time I reached another opening in the mountains. I got a vista of more mountains. Most of the time I just saw mist. One time I walked round the shores of a small loch. When I reached the other end there was another loch. . . .

I came down into a grey valley in the mid-afternoon and saw something a mile ahead that reminded me of the French Foreign Legion and the mirages of the desert.

But it was a road—a real, shiny, rainy, black road. I even saw a road-signpost.

I made it in fifteen minutes and hung, gasping, on to the wire fence.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I EASED my stocking feet into a more comfortable position on the pouffe and poured myself another large dram from the bottle.

I sipped this one. I counted the other two as path-finders.

"MacInally was a great guy. Best there was. You don't hear much about Toronto or Montreal cops. Bet you didn't even know there *were* cops in these places, Sergeant. When people talk about cops in Canada, they start thinkin' about Nelson Eddy and the Mounties and campfires and the trappin' Indians. Nearest MacInally ever got to a camp was his fortnight's vacation on the lakes. A great guy, though." I sipped more whisky and looked at my waist. "These trousers aren't bad. I only had to fold them round me once."

Sergeant McIvor looked up from the table, took off his spectacles and laid down the pen. "That'll be everything, then, Mr. Daly. It's not much of a report, is it now?"

I lit another cigarette. "Anybody can make out a report, Sergeant. Everybody makes 'em out these days—hall porters, brush salesmen, market researchers, pigeon fanciers, gasworks foremen, newspaper cartoonists—everybody can read'n write. Bad thing. Makes everything too competitive. To make money these days a guy's got to be able to play the bassoon upside down while he's drinking dry martinis. That's what education does. Must have gimmicks. Reports are things of the past."

He leaned his weight on one elbow on the chenille-covered table. "I wish you'd tell that to my chief at Perth, Mr. Daly."

"Have a drink, Serge."

He grinned. "No, thanks. Not in uniform."

"Maybe I shouldn't be drinkin' either. I'm wearing your uniform trousers." I thought about that one. "But it's just your trousers. Maybe I should just have *half*-whiskies." That cheered me. "You could take off your jacket and have half a glass."

He grinned. "Man, you're the queerest I've had for a while. I still don't know what there is to report." He rubbed his large double chin.

I sat back in the large armchair and waved my cigarettes. "Tell 'em the truth, Serge. I come in here. Your wife gives me a humdinger of a three-course meal. Tell 'em all the details—Scotch broth, venison, potatoes, sprouts, sauce. Then you can——"

"What I want to tell them, Mr. Daly—if you'll stop dramming for five minutes—is what the blazes you're doing in these parts at all at this time of the year."

The telephone rang out in the little office. I laid down my glass and almost beat him to the door. He laid an enormous arm gently across my chest and said, "Easy, Mr. Daly! That's Inverbeld Police

Station telephone that's ringing," then he sat down behind the polished light-oak counter and picked up the receiver. "Inverbeld Police. . . Yes, it is. . . Yes. . . Yes, sir. . . Indeed he is, sir. . . ." He held out the receiver to me. "It's Glasgow C.I.D. for you."

I took the phone. It was Rae. He said:

"Daly? Have they arrived?"

"Not yet."

"They should be with you any time now. There are two Revenue men with them."

I said, "I hope somebody's armed."

"Nobody is."

"You're crazy. I told you——"

"I know all that. They'll manage. They have handcuffs."

I sighed. "You guys'll underquote the end of the world. Is Pollok with them?"

"Yes. He's in charge."

"You want me to tell you when they get here?"

"No. Just get straight there."

"Okay."

He hesitated. "And, Daly . . ."

"Yes?"

"You'd better be right about this." He hung up.

I sat at the desk for a while, thinking. Sergeant McIvor stood beside me. He touched my arm. I got up and we returned to the warm fireside.

I poured another drink. "Where were we, Serge?"

He heaved himself into the other armchair and sighed. "If I could tell you that, Mr. Daly, I'd be a happy man. What in the devil's name is happening in this place tonight at all, at all?"

I sat down. "It's like porridge, Serge. The longer it's heated, the thicker it gets. Down the hatch." I swallowed some whisky.

There was the quiet squeal of brakes outside. The sergeant went out to the office. I reached for my shoes, put them on and was tying the laces when Pollok came in. His droopy, melancholy-looking raincoat was spangled with raindrops. His face was sallow, gloomy, sour.

He said, "You got the map?"

Sergeant McIvor lumbered behind him and fetched a large map mounted on board from behind the sofa. "I have it here, sir."

I finished tying my shoelaces and put on the old tweed jacket I borrowed from the sergeant. I said: "I've marked the area with a

pencil—as near as I can fix it. But it doesn't seem to fit. There are five small lochs in that district."

Pollok leaned over the map and screwed his eyes and pointed to the loch I had pencilled. "That's it. We can get there in an hour."

I said to the sergeant, "What would be the telephone exchange covered by that district?"

"Logan Bridge, sir—takes in all that area."

I was trying to figure how far our destination was from Gilfillan. I thanked the sergeant.

I hoped the weight of my Colt in the right-hand pocket didn't show. I said: "Rae phoned. He says you're not armed."

"That's right." Pollok was at the door. For such a dreary, drab man he seemed to get from place to place surprisingly fast. I spoke to his back as I followed him. I said: "Why don't you just sue them or issue a writ? That might frighten them."

"We brought handcuffs—and a warrant."

We were out at the car. In the darkness I saw another car behind ours. Pollok held the door open and I got in. He climbed in at the back beside me.

When the car drew away, Pollok introduced us. "Harry Stewart, one of our men. James Parker, Revenue officer." Stewart, who was driving, kept his eyes on the road and said, "How do." Parker offered me a cigarette which I took and lit. Pollok's contribution to the conversation seemed over at that. He sat back, huddled in the corner. The two in front, too, kept quiet.

I sat back and let the smoke drift from my nostrils. Cops! They gave me the jabbers! No guns—nothing. How the hell did they imagine they were going to take that whisky outfit? With a warrant? What did they think they were up against? A back-street distiller? Handcuffs! I almost sobbed.

Now here they were shut in one car with the only man who could tell them anything about the set-up. The private eye who got in and got out alive. Do they jive him with questions? Do they make any plans based on his suggestions—the only valid suggestions anybody *could* give? Do they hell! They sit and look like a visiting committee of a Hospital Board who need lunch.

Cops! Big and small, they're all the same. Give them any kind of big job and they put on the Dragnet act. It's part of the uniform. They say nothing because there's nothing to say. When they need an idea, or when they *have* to try and understand what ticks humanity-wise, they demand it like the democratic vote or the

ratepayer's public library ticket. Usually from private dicks like me.

Smart eggs! Let's see how they would get around this one.

I sat back and watched the blackness outside. It was raining. I said, "Who's in the other car?"

Pollok said, "Heddles, plain-clothes man and a Revenue officer called McBeth." He paused. "While I remember—there were no prints on that gun."

We were silent again. I felt angrier. Pollok looked as if we were returning from a funeral. Parker wore glasses and he took them off to wipe them with his handkerchief. Glasses! Going to a beat-up!

Stewart just drove. He wore a neat navy-blue melton overcoat and a soft Homburg hat. I liked the hat. It looked genteel. I hoped Keenan and the boys liked it.

During the journey I said to Pollok, "I've just thought of something."

"What?"

"If that map's right, it places this estate less than ten miles from somewhere else."

"It places it ten miles from where?"

"The hotel where Kelso was killed."

He looked at me. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing," I said. "I just thought I'd mention it."

The car slowed down and turned down a side-road that seemed to run alongside a small wood of tall fir trees. It stopped. Pollok sat still. Parker adjusted his spectacles again. Stewart switched off the engine, then the lights.

Very soon the other car drew up silently behind us and dowsed all its lights and the engine stopped. The driver—Heddles, the plain-clothes man—appeared as a dark shape at our window. He opened the door and put his head in. He said quietly, "All right?"

Pollok and Stewart rose to get out of the car. Parker moved over to the driver's seat. I stayed still.

Pollok said, "Okay, Daly—let's go."

"Let's go where?"

"To the other car."

"What's *he* going to do?" I indicated Parker at the driving-wheel.

Pollok said, "Get us in."

I opened my door and came round to sit at the front beside Parker.

Pollok said, "Where're you going?"

"I want to present the search-warrant officially at the front gate —you know, like a Lord Mayor. I've never done it before. It'll be a big thrill."

They looked at me. Pollok took a breath and said: "Daly, you're getting comic again. Get into this other car."

"You go to hell." I got angry. "You must have a hole in your head if you think I'm going to see Her Majesty's Secretary of Slot Machines blow open my case by going to the front door and asking for Annie. They'll send you the pieces back here in his hat!"

"Daly, listen——"

"Listen nothing. I came out of that Belsen on a piano wire. I had to beat my way out. This time I make sure I come out *driving* the hearse."

"What d'you think *we'll* be doing?"

"You can be playing the French horn for all I care! If you want this whisky mob you'll find them ten yards from me in about half an hour."

Pollok pointed his finger. "You let Parker do his job first, Daly. If you interfere in that I'll arrest you. Get that into your thick skull. I'll arrest you. He's a Revenue officer. If you want to go along with him—hell mend you!" He turned and walked back to the other car. The other two followed him.

Parker started the car, put on the lights and drove away. I said nothing. After a few minutes, he said: "I wouldn't get worked up so much about this, Mr. Daly. We Revenue people often have peculiar jobs. I know there *is* a man at the estate gates. All I have to do is insist that he allows us to enter."

I said, "I bet you even have a search warrant!"

"Indeed I have. I have it here." He indicated his coat pocket. "And I know the police have handcuffs."

I nearly wept.

We reached the gates in ten minutes. I couldn't recognize them because I had never actually seen them earlier. They were massive wrought-iron things supported on the outside ends by two granite pillars. A stout, high wall ran outwards from them outside the estate grounds.

Parker stopped the car and switched off the engine. He said

quietly: "Perhaps you should stay here just now, Mr. Daly. This is often quite an unpleasant negotiation."

I took out my Colt and checked the chamber. "Sure."

He stared. "A gun! Mr. Daly, *please* put that away. There will be no need, I assure you." He looked worried.

I held it on my knee. "Sure."

"If you use a firearm you may spoil everything."

He opened the car door and I watched him walk round the car and up to the iron gates. He called in a moderate tone against the wind, "I say...."

No answer.

Again: "I say.... Anyone there?"

This time a door opened at the lodge house. There was a thin shaft of light and I saw the outline of a short, stocky man. His voice groaned: "Yeh? What is it?" I recognized the throaty, husky voice.

Parker said: "I'm afraid I've lost my way. Could you direct me to the Fort William trunk road?"

There was the sound of footsteps. Then the little side-gate opened and the man stood in the darkness opposite Parker barely three yards from the car.

I unfastened the safety-catch of my revolver.

He rumbled: "Yer on the wrong road this way. Get along to—"

There were only two hits. Parker banged him in the belly then brought the edge of his hand down silently on his neck. The man dropped flat and straight. Parker bent immediately, opened the back door of the car, and started to heave the inert body inside. I pocketed my gun, ran round and helped him. He said softly: "Stay here. If anyone else comes out of that house, deal with them adequately." Then he jumped into the car, started it up and drove off with his load of unconsciousness.

I kept in to the wall and watched the house. No one appeared. The other police car drove up, stopped and the four occupants got out quietly.

Pollok said, "Lead the way from here."

I went through the side-gate first and the others followed. We spread out so that no one walked on the roadway itself. It all reminded me of 1943 in Italy.

The rain had stopped now. There were patches of cold moonlight showing through the scattered ceiling of scudding clouds.

The wind was strengthening and the clouds were gliding high in clear night air. As we approached the loch the wind seemed to freshen and become stronger, colder. I heard the crash and hiss of waves on the shore. The tall fir trees stood in regal silhouette against the cold night sky of scudding clouds, their high, close-grouped branches sighing and creaking in the wind.

I felt soft sand beneath my feet—sand and grass then sand again. My clothes flapped as I walked against the breeze and I screwed my eyes to see in the blue-black darkness. I looked out on the dark water. For a few seconds the high, scurrying clouds parted to uncover the bright, icy-silver moon; its reflection glinted far out on the loch and deepened the shadows of the trees on the shore.

I could see no one else near me as I crept quickly from tree to tree. But I knew they were there—in those shadows behind me, behind that boat-shed on my right, among those trees a few yards from the road. These guys knew what they were doing. Parker's little negotiation with the gatehouse hood told me all I wanted to know about British Revenue cops. And Pollok's two men looked as if they had invented the Russian Secret Police!

I could see the shape of the house now. It looked like a huge gravestone—silent, dead. There were no lights, no movement. The moon shone again and its light shimmered coldly on a slated roof of a square turret. I stopped and leaned on a tree in the shadows.

Pollok's whisper sounded at my elbow. "Which way in?"

"I only know one," I said. "Through that courtyard nearest us. Door into the house is on the right."

He grunted. There was silence for a time. An owl hooted somewhere. Then Pollok said: "I'm putting Stewart right up to the door. He'll make a sound small enough and big enough to get one of them to the door. Then he'll deal with whoever that is and we'll go into the house."

"Just like that!"

"That's right. Wait here." He turned and padded back into the darkness. Soon he reappeared with Stewart. "Okay," he said, "that's it. If you want to recover your fee from Callingway, you can keep twenty yards behind him."

"I'll keep him covered."

"You'll do hell. You fire anything and I'll have you arrested. I've got a pension coming."

Stewart said, "If I need your help, I'll call you, Mr. Daly."

I grinned and crept towards the house behind Stewart. The lorries were gone but there was a car I recognized as the green Janus saloon. Ten yards from the courtyard I let him go on. I watched him tiptoe along the shaded wall, past my old "cell", past the harness-room and up to the door. I knelt down in the shadow of the wall and watched him as he kicked at the door. The banging broke the silence of the night. I heard footsteps. The door was opened at once; a figure appeared. I heard Stewart, in a mock-gasping voice, say something. The figure started to speak, but choked off in a strangled sob. I saw a short, quick scuffle, heard a loud thump and Stewart was inside the house. I ran quickly and silently to follow him in the doorway. I was getting a new impression of British public officials.

Pollok and McBeth were beside me as Heddles fixed handcuffs on the hands of the body at the door which I recognized as Number Two. We ran along a dark corridor, up the stairs at the end and up another flight. I could hear the sounds of the bottling plant now as I ran. It was a weird, high-pitched hum that sang and sang on and on. "Quick," I shouted, "cover these doors. The plant's in there." I threw open one of the doors as McBeth and Heddles ran round to the other entrances to the hall. Stewart and Pollock parted and ran along a passage.

The first person to see me was the short man with the bald head. He still wore his brown warehouse coat and he was standing, under an enormous wooden vat looking through a beakerful of amber liquid against the electric light. He laid down the beaker and looked around him in panic. Then he fumbled inside the top of his warehouse coat.

I shouted above the hum: "Stay where you are, Egghead. The building's surrounded with cops." I took out my Colt and went forward. I slipped my hand inside his coat and drew out a small blue-black revolver.

He clutched the edge of a work-table and glared about him. McBeth was standing at the door opposite. Heddles had arrived at a wider entrance-way further down.

There were three of them at the plant—Egghead, Gatti and Keenan. The noise stopped as the bottling-machine switch was thrown.

McBeth said: "Just stand still—all of you. This building's surrounded." Then he ran forward and clinked handcuffs on the

wrists of Keenan and Gatti. Heddles did the same with Number Two. Egghead just stood, glaring, as McBeth came over and fixed his pair.

I turned and ran along the passage-way then up two flights of stairs to the balustrade. I ran along the gallery towards the room I remembered for my "interview". I tackled the adjoining room's door first. It was locked. I heaved at the door with my shoulder but it was solid Scotch pine and wouldn't yield a bit. I tried the next and opened it to find myself again in that tranquil, deep-carpeted hush of chintz-and-Dresden china. I ran to the connecting door on my right, tried it. It opened at my turn of the handle.

Graham sat at the big desk. He was smoking and he held a glass in his hand. "Hello, Mr. Daly. Like a drink?"

This room was as elegantly furnished as the one adjoining it—cherry-red fitted carpet, sandalwood longboy, dove-grey curtains, slender-legged chairs.

I took off my hat. "Thanks." I slipped my hand into the inside pocket of my coat and took out my Colt. I unfastened the safety-catch. I threw my hat on the floor and walked to Graham. "Stand up. Put your hands up."

Smiling, he did so. "This is too theatrical, Mr. Daly. You've been reading detective stories again."

I ignored his talk and frisked him. Nothing. I pocketed my gun and sat on the vacant chair. "I'll have the drink now."

He poured a large dram from his desk decanter and handed it to me. "Best there is."

"It should be the best. It's got all the best liquors in it."

He raised his glass and said to me: "As you say, Daly—it should be the best. It came from half a dozen of the best distilleries."

I drank some whisky. "You had a good run."

He looked into his glass. "What d'you think I'll get?"

I looked at him. His eyes met mine. I said, "You should know better than I what the Revenue raps are." I sipped my whisky. "They'll wrap the book round your ears." I paused. "Then they'll charge you with the murder of Kelso."

His face seemed to set to a pallid marble instantly. His fingers round the glass looked like white talons. Time seemed to stop—except that we could hear a clock in the room tick quite clearly. When he spoke his voice was tighter, higher. "What're you talking about?"

There was a shadow in the door-frame. I turned my eyes. Pollok

was leaning against the door-sill, his droopy face grimmer and sadder than ever before.

I went on: "You made mistakes all along the line, Graham. The first one when you stopped Kelso having that consumer research on your whisky in London. Then you faked your own whisky theft to draw off the scent. And the biggest one was when you telephoned Kelso's wife at the hotel the night you killed him. You phoned from *that* phone." I nodded to the instrument on his desk.

He spoke quietly, "Kelso was killed by an accidental shooting."

"Kelso was killed by *you*, Graham. You were playing with his wife. He protested and threatened to blow open what he knew about your whisky. So you killed him—with a Cumberland duck-gun at close quarters from the reeds. You camouflaged the noise with Seton's gun."

"You imbecile, Daly. I was in Glasgow when Kelso was killed."

"You were less than twenty yards from him. You were in that bungalow with Margo Kelso when her husband came up from Glasgow. He called into the hotel, had a drink and a quick meal, then he went up to the bungalow. He found you with his wife and he raised hell. You tried to twist his arm by threatening to take away your account from his agency. Then he dropped a hint that he knew something about how you were getting your whisky. So you ate humble pie until you could figure things out. You knew from that moment that Kelso had to be silenced. This was the first leak you'd ever discovered about your set-up. So you said you were sorry for being so indiscreet and left the bungalow.

"You said you were going back to Glasgow but you did not. You came here. On the way here you called at a small pub two miles from Mellion called the Crosskeys. In there you heard a young man talk about wildfowling to somebody and you saw his gun—a Cumberland—and you heard him say where he was doing his shooting—half a mile up from the hotel and quite near the bungalow. Back here, you telephoned Margo Kelso at the hotel to find out how things were and you learned that they were staying overnight and that Kelso was going fishing up the river. It was then you saw a chance to get rid of Kelso. You knew there was a Cumberland sports gun in the gunroom here. You had used it before. So you fixed up your little plan to go back to the river—it's only ten miles—and wait there among the reeds for Kelso. You knew that if the young man or any other wildfowlers were shooting nearby

there was a good chance of *your* shot being confused with theirs. So you took the chance. And because your Seton was shooting thirty yards away from you, the whole idea nearly came off. You shot Kelso—and blew half his head off. Then you hid your gun in the river and came away."

He kept looking at me for a long time, his handsome young face rigid, pale. He drank the rest of his whisky, still looking at me fixedly, laid down the glass quietly. "You'll never prove a word of this—never."

Pollok said, "Finger-prints are good enough evidence."

Graham glared at him. "You——" Then he stopped.

Pollok uncoiled himself from the door-jamb. He kept his hands in his pockets and jerked his head towards the open door. "Time we moved."

The sergeant held the door of his sitting-room open for me and I went in. Pollok sat over by the fire, a cup of tea in his hand. He was chewing scone, the rest of which he held in his fingers. Callingway was seated in the other chair and he got up when he saw me, his cup and saucer rattling as he laid it nervously on the table. "Daly. Damn good job, Daly. Damn good." He pumped my hand up and down. "I got up here's fast as I could."

"Thanks," I said, and sat down. I took off my hat. The sergeant poured me a cup of tea, gave me two buttered scones on a plate and creaked out heavily and quietly.

Callingway couldn't keep still. He walked up and down the little sitting-room. "Graham! I can hardly believe it, Daly. Graham! He's had a whole gang working for him—using the stolen whisky in his blending. I *knew* it was somebody who knew whisky. Remember I said that, Daly? And he rented that estate place under an assumed name."

I ate scone.

He paced on and prattled on. "Blending the bloody stuff—our own stuff." He stopped. "What about that whisky he had stolen from his own distillery at Inveraray?"

Pollok swallowed the last of his scone. "Fake—for a false scent. He felt the heat. And he knew you'd engaged a dick."

"He was a cunning swine—cunning."

I drank tea.

"But you've done your job, Daly—you've done it, boy. You certainly earned your fee—and more."

"It would've helped if you had told me the truth about your knowing Kelso."

Callingway gaped, closed his mouth, looked nervous. "Yes. That. Well . . ." He shrugged. "You know, I didn't think it important. It was Graham who introduced him to me at an association dinner in London."

"And you got fresh with his wife?"

He coughed. "Yes, I—did get a bit too much liquor. You know—damn bad show. We were all a bit tipsy."

"And Kelso put the bite on you?"

"Well, he—yes, he did, I suppose. Said he'd like to handle my advertising account. I said I'd think it over." He shrugged. "And that was that. I forgot about the whole thing. Never saw'm again till we met at that hotel."

There was a sound of a car stopping outside.

I sighed. "It could have landed you in helluva trouble—not telling me."

"Yes, I suppose so." He fingered his mouth and chin. "You know how it is. If my wife got to know. . . ."

"I don't mean that. You know Kelso was murdered?"

"Murdered!"

I wiped my mouth with my handkerchief. "Graham murdered him."

Callingway sat down—heavily, his eyes staring. "No!"

"Yes."

The door behind me opened and the sergeant put his head in. "If you'll excuse me, sir—there're two people here say they've to see you."

I turned round. "Who are they?"

"I think they're from a newspaper. There's a lady——"

"Tell them to get to hell!" Pollok said, sitting up. "Daly——"

"Tell them to come in here, Sergeant." I turned to Pollok. "They're friends of mine. It's Lamont of the *Dispatch*."

Pollok stood up. "Sergeant, tell them to get back where they came from."

I stood up. "Polly—you're getting peptic. Dick Lamont helped me on this case. I want him in here."

"This is a police-station house—not a news-desk."

I shrugged. "Okay. I'll talk to them at a news-desk."

"Daly! Don't be a bloody fool." Pollok was really angry. "I thought you had brains. All we've done is make six arrests."

"What d'you think Lamont's going to do?"

"Catch today's street edition if he can."

"Don't be crazy. I promised him that if this thing blew, he'd have an exclusive. He's here to collect."

Pollok glared at me. "The police don't give exclusives to any newspaper people."

"Daly does. To his friends." I stopped to let that go below the surface. "You tell your story where you like, Polly. Run a cocktail press show for all I care. But what I tell Lamont is my business as a free person." I blew on my cigarette. "You're forgetting something—I haven't told you or anybody else all the details of this case. If you think you don't need me now, just say so. I can talk to Lamont elsewhere."

He glared. His droopy mouth was working. After a while, he said to the sergeant, "Send them in."

Dick and Mavis came in. They knew something was not right. Dick looked at Pollok, grinned sheepishly and nodded to me.

"Lo, Ken. Am I intruding?"

"You are." Pollok sat down.

Mavis put her tan handbag on the table and sat down demurely. "Hello, Ken."

I said: "Mr. Callingway—Dick Lamont, Miss Sangster." Callingway shook their hands.

Pollok said: "Mr. Lamont, I just want you to know you're in this police-station house without proper permission. I'm worried about what you'll do with any information you get here."

Dick said: "Sure. That's understandable. I'll publish it."

Pollok closed his eyes. "He'll publish it!" He opened his eyes. "Now, listen——"

"Relax, Polly," I said. "What's got into you? Dick's not off his head. He'll publish it at the right time."

"Harry Pollok," said Dick. "Listen. You know how much I put into this whisky case last year. I nearly got fired for sending out every bloodhound we had. Nobody knows better than you how I felt about it. I was never off your doorstep. D'you think at this stage when I'm six feet away from an exclusive that I'll wreck it by playing nasty? I've got a responsible paper, Harry—and I've been a pretty responsible newsman for too long to risk *that* kind of boob. Just let Ken give me the facts—I'll publish when *you say I can—not before.*"

Pollok drummed his fingers.

Callingway pulled his chin and tried to look neutral.
I drank my tea.

Mavis took out a cigarette and lit it.

After a while, Pollok said quietly: "Okay. You get the first run-through." He raised his finger. "But if there's any of this in tomorrow's papers that shouldn't be...."

"There won't be," said Dick. "I've got a wife and kids."

I said: "What I think worries the police is the murder aspect, Dick. The main witness who is to testify doesn't even know Graham's been arrested yet."

Callingway said: "Who is that?"

"Mrs. Kelso."

Dick said: "Let me ask the questions, Ken. I can work better that way."

"Okay."

"First—what were they doing with the whisky?"

"Selling it."

"Selling it! Where?"

"In pubs, in hotels—anywhere you can buy whisky."

"You mean—in the open market?"

"That's right. Branded. And labelled."

"Labelled!" Dick was gaping. "Under what name?"

Pollok said: "Scotch Dirk Whisky. Blended and bottled by Graham and Connolly Ltd."

Dick laid down his pencil. "You mean . . . ? But what about revenue? I don't get it."

I said: "They skipped revenue, Dick. This is how it worked. Graham and his boys didn't pinch *any* kind of whisky. He picked his types. And these types of whiskies more or less blended to give him a good saleable product. They blended it at that estate hide-out and bottled and labelled it there—Scotch Dirk Whisky. Then the trucks took it south to London where it simply joined the normal supplies of Scotch Dirk from the wholesale depot. By that time it was all out of bond and Revenue couldn't catch it."

"But these depots have Revenue inspectors."

"Sure. But this stuff didn't go near the depot. It went straight to Graham's customers—the big hotels and distributors."

Mavis said: "But what about the blend? Didn't it vary in taste?"

Callingway said: "Miss Sangster, very few whiskies are exactly

the same blend, even under the one label. There's always bound to be a difference."

"But this stuff was bound to have a big difference, surely."

Callingway shrugged. "Who cares? It was a blended whisky, more or less the same blend. Could you tell the difference between my whisky and, say, another two kinds of the same price and quality?"

Mavis smiled. "I drink sherry."

I grinned. "And I drink whisky."

Dick said: "Some of the stuff he used was young whisky. It hadn't been properly matured."

"Ah!" Callingway said. "Now you're getting to the *real* worry. Not matured. Tell'm, Daly. Fantastic business."

"Well," I said. "It's as simple as this. Graham matured it—fast."

"How?"

"By the sonic system. Sound vibration." I looked at Pollok. "That was the reason for the high-pitched hum we were hearing at their place."

Dick threw his pad on the table. "I'll give this to the fiction editor."

I grinned. "You'll give it to the other papers if you don't pin your big ears back and listen. The American hooch-stillers have been using this method for a long time. They use sound vibration —two octaves above middle C—on young whisky, and it matures inside an hour."

Callingway almost shouted. "Doesn't *mature* it, Daly—*can't* mature it. It gives it a *mature taste*. Different thing—different thing altogether."

I shrugged. "It makes it a saleable product. Scotch Dirk was never a helluva good kind of whisky, anyway, but this system must've been pretty hot to have kept sales up all over the country."

Callingway grunted. "Hooch with a good taste!"

Dick said: "What happened about Kelso? Where did he fit?"

I lit a cigarette. "Kelso handled four liquor accounts in his advertising agency—and Graham's was the biggest. About six months ago a research outfit in London wanted to do a poll on whisky consumption in London. Kelso put it to his client, but Graham refused to have anything to do with it. Why? Because that poll would have shown more Scotch Dirk whisky being distributed in London than was being legally made. Kelso got suspicious of Graham's refusal to go into this research so he

ordered it to be done in the name of his advertising agency—in his own name."

"What did the research show? Did you find out?" asked Mavis.

Callingway said: "I did. Three times more of Graham's whisky was circulating than was made. The figures stuck out like a sore thumb on the research tables."

Dick said: "You think Kelso knew what was going on?"

I shook my head. "No, but he knew there was something. And he had an idea Graham was seeing too much of his wife, as well. Kelso was sent to London by Graham specially to tell that research outfit *not* to include Scotch Dirk. Kelso *did* go to them, but he told them to go ahead and research Scotch Dirk with the others. Then he returned to Glasgow a day earlier than he was expected. Maybe he had an idea about Graham and his wife, I don't know. Anyway he finds she's away from the flat and he takes a chance by motoring to Mellion Bay. And he's right. Graham and his wife *are* there—in the bungalow."

Dick lit a cigarette. Mavis made some notes. I stood up. "That should be enough for six issues, Dick."

Pollok said: "It should be enough for six years, if he publishes it cold before this case starts."

"Where are you going, Ken?" Dick asked.

"I'll see you back in Glasgow. I've a call to make."

She led the way into the warm room and I closed the door behind me. I took off my hat and sat down. She remained standing by the fire, one slender arm supporting her body as she looked absently into the flames. She was wearing a grey-green dress and a broad white belt was about her slim waist. Her hair, smooth and black, gleamed in the warm glow of the room.

We said nothing for a long while. I fingered the rim of my hat. She just stared into the fire.

My breaking of the silence seemed obscene. "You know now."

She came away from the fireplace slowly and walked to the sideboard. Opening the door, she brought out a cup and saucer which she placed on the little table in front of me. There was already her own cup and saucer, a small jug of milk, a sugar bowl and a coffee-pot. She poured my coffee, sat down on the chair and said: "Yes. I know now, Mr. Daly."

"These things never do make any difference."

She clasped her long fingers about her crossed knee. "You men

never *do* know what a woman wants. You can do anything you like. You can run any rackets you like, say anything, do anything—swindle, steal, tell lies, shoot people—anything. All we want you to do is stay with one woman and don't die."

"These are the two hardest things on earth any man can attempt, Mrs. Kelso."

We were silent again for a while. She poured her own coffee as I lifted mine. Then I said: "You must have known—somehow."

"How could I?"

"He was running that whisky racket for years."

She sugared her coffee. "That wasn't important. Rackets aren't important to a woman. Most things are rackets anyway, one way or another."

"Why were you so anxious to find out if it was *he* who killed your husband?"

She shrugged. "What I wanted to find out was the reason why he killed him."

"That's elementary, surely. He had to silence him. Your husband was getting suspicious about Graham's whisky."

She stirred her coffee and raised it to sip it quietly. "I didn't mean that."

I thought about that one. No idea would shape up in my mind for a long time. Then I saw how she was thinking. "You think he cultivated you simply to find out how much either of you knew about his affairs?"

She made no answer.

I finished my coffee. "It's the way they do things, Mrs. Kelso. I've known it like that time and time again."

She laid down her cup and saucer. "That's all I wanted to find out."

"Do you know—even now?"

She shook her head. "I never will."

"You certainly tried hard—checking his phone call to the hotel that night, hiding the gun in the house here." I paused. "I suppose you just wanted him to come out in the open."

She was looking into the fire. "If he had come to me and told me everything, I wouldn't have blamed him. That's what I wanted—I wanted him to come to me and tell me."

"You're a strange woman, Mrs. Kelso."

"I'm a woman."

I stood up. "Will you see him?"

She shook her head.

"You'd know the truth."

Her voice was low and sounded weary. "I'd rather stay here—and feel the truth."

I left her still staring into the fire.

When I reached my car at the turning of the little road, someone was leaning against the radiator. It was Mavis Sangster.

"Where did you come from?" I asked.

"Why didn't you leave the door open. I'm frozen." She held the collar of her tweed coat close up about her neck. "I got Dick to drop me here."

I grinned as I unlocked the doors. "You should've gone back home with Dick. You'd have been warmer."

She sat in the car beside me. "And leave you with that vampire?"

As we moved off on to the main road, I said, "Mavis."

"Yes."

"You're all vampires." I put my arm around her.

TAKES A REAL MAN

Jack Schaefer



TAKES A REAL MAN

THAT'S fair cussing, gents. Stings the ears a bit. But it's mule-team cussing. Might do to make the rope tails move along. Wouldn't push a yoke of oxen ten feet on a downgrade. Now if you could hear Big Jake Bannack....

Never drove an ox team did you? Slowest critters in harness ever grew hoofs. Outpull anything else on four feet and do it on a little dry grass for fodder. But slow. I've seen a turtle come up behind a three-yoke freighting outfit and swing wide and go past without even hurrying. And they're stupid. And stubborn. And aggravating in endless ways. Maybe all that because, being oxen, riling folks to fury is about the only kick they can get out of life. Just one thing they understand. Strong language. Strong and stinging with smoke coming out of it. That'll make them move. Takes a real man to do it....

Big Jake can do it. Big Jake can make the slowest oxen step along so fast for them they look almost alive. He's big with near the heft of an ox himself. Chest like a hogshead. Mouth like a megaphone. Mind made for cussing, chockfull of all the words plain and fancy any man ever knew and plenty more he's thought up for himself. When he rears back and uncoils his whip and sucks in air till that chest's ready to bust out the oversize shirt he's a-wearing, timid folks with tender ears run for cover. He starts easy, voice just a-rumbling in his throat, but all the same oxen that'll stand sleepy through the best cussing another man can do'll perk their ears and begin to blow a bit. They know. He's talking their language. In no time at all he's really a-raring and the echoes bounce through the hills and the air gets hot and a blue smoke rises and the oxen move. They move all right. They haul the heaviest wagon out of the deepest mudhole and plod up the road with the wickedest whip in the world picking flies off their rumps and the most sulphurous cussing this side the devil's fireplace roasting their hides every step....

Yep. Big Jake can do it. Big Jake freights supplies from the railroad up the slopes to my town. Nothing's too big or too heavy for

him to haul, not with those six big oxen of his and the two biggest under the lead yoke. Garfield and Hayes he calls those two. Big Jake's a Democrat. Gives his critters Republican names so his cussing can do double duty.

Once a month he makes the round trip up from the railroad. It's quite an event when he arrives. We know he's coming long before he's in sight. There's a bad stretch about half a mile out of town where the grade's particular steep and the road runs narrow between two cliffs. Springs from the rocks keep the ground soft. When he hits that stretch he lets out the last notches in his cussing and just about plain blasts those oxen through. We're doing this and doing that round town and we hear the first hot echoes hopping through the hills and the womenfolk close their windows and stuff cotton in their ears and the rest of us gather to watch the road. First thing we see is the blue smoke floating up over the cliffs. Then we see Garfield and Hayes heaving and straining to top the grade and behind them come the other two yokes on the chain and then the wagons, four of them, the big-bodied lead and the two trailers and the small camp outfit tagging on two wheels, and beside them Big Jake himself snaking out the whip and a-roaring. His cussing comes straight at us along the road then and we listen close to catch what he's saying and any new brand of profanity he's invented. But when he reaches town we scatter quick. For the first five minutes the main street's his. He needs time to celebrate and simmer down. He plants his feet firm in the dust and sends his forty-foot whip lashing out in every direction and crackling like cannon on the Fourth. He looks around to see if anyone fool enough to be within range so he can nip a hat off a head or a button off a vest. His oxen stop and stand sleepy-eyed chewing their cuds and maybe a mite proud that he's cussed them into doing it again but, being oxen, too cantankerous ever to let that show. The cussing dwindles to a kind of purring and the whip-cracking fades in a last few tickling pops and when he starts coiling the leather the rest of us come running out to see who'll be first to buy Big Jake a big drink....

Yep. That's the way he used to do it. That's the way he still does it. But there's a difference nowadays. Echoes still bounce through the hills when he starts a-roaring. Smoke still rises and the oxen still move. The tone's the same and the tune's the same. But the words are different....

. . . .

The Right Reverend Pemberton Willoughby's responsible. It's all his, the whole credit. He beats Big Jake at Big Jake's own game. Beats him fair and square, and that changes the words and likely the Right Reverend Pemberton Willoughby's the one man ever could do it....

Parson Pem we call him. The full name's too much in the mouth. He's big too, almost of a size with Big Jake himself, though he doesn't seem so at first in his pegleg pants and frock coat. Has a fine preaching voice too, deep and round and carrying far for outdoor services. He comes to town one day riding on his old mule and slides off and announces he's heard we need a church. He's decided our souls must be sickly from sojourning in a churchless town and require weekly applications of verbal mustard plasters in the form of sermons and he's arrived to see we get the same. If there are any objections, will the objectors please to step forward at once so he can take care of them right away without wasting any time. None of us really object. Anyone can come into my town any day and set up any kind of a shop he wants long as he doesn't step on too many toes too hard. But this gent wants objections and we're always obliging so a couple of the boys step forward to offer some and before they know what's happening he has them both by their necks and pops their heads together and there they are both sitting dazed on the ground and he's looking around bright and cheerful for more. There aren't any more. "Fine," he says. "Couldn't be better. This is Tuesday. There's no reason why, come Sunday, with you all working the way I'll show you, we shouldn't have a church built."

He's right. Come Sunday, he has his church up. No pews in it yet and no pulpit, but the walls are solid and the roof's almost on and there's the start of a little steeple sprouting in front. Everybody contributes something, material or work, because he's that kind of a man. Makes you want to contribute. By time the next Sunday rolls around we're all convinced. He's our parson. Maybe we don't all expect to be too regular in attendance at his little church, but he's our parson and we're proud of him. His preaching's the right kind, simple and straight and scorching the sinners and short so the wooden seats don't get too hard. And he's the helpingest man ever lived. Let a neighbour be putting in some fence and Parson Pem is out there with his frock coat off a-digging post holes. Let a woman have an extra heavy week's washing and like enough Parson Pem'll be coming along and rolling up his

sleeves and plunging his hands into the soapsuds. Let a jam develop at the blacksmith shop with people waiting long for work and it's Parson Pem who'll be in there pumping the bellows and swinging the second hammer. Can't say he converts every one of us to every point in the dogma he likes to expound. Can say he converts plenty of people and some surprising at that to his way of being neighbourly.

Yep. The Right Reverend Pemberton Willoughby's our preacher. I figure it's about the third week he's been with us and the tip's being put on the steeple and just about everybody in town is standing around watching, when we heard the first hot echoes hopping through the hills far down the road where it comes up between those two cliffs. Parson Pem hears them too but they're still too faint for him to make out the words. He stares in surprise at the women-folk scattering to their houses and slamming doors and pulling down windows. He stares along the road with the rest of us and sees the blue smoke with sulphur edgings float up over the cliffs. He sees Garfield and Hayes come heaving and straining over the top of the grade and behind them the other two yokes and then the wagons and beside them Big Jake snaking out the whip and a-roaring and filling the air with the smell of brimstone. The words come straight along the road now and Parson Pem can make them out. A look of horror settles over his face and he claps his hands to his ears. But that's not much protection against Big Jake's voice and brand of cussing and, anyway, the temptation's strong. He eases on the hands and then drops them and just stands there staring in a kind of unbelieving fascination at Big Jake a-coming.

He's still standing there still staring when Big Jake hits main street and the rest of us skip for cover. The oxen stop and drop their eyelids and start chewing their cuds and Big Jake plants his feet firm in the road dust and starts cracking the whip. He sees Parson Pem standing there and out snakes the whip and off sails the parson's hat. Big Jake is some surprised when Parson Pem still stands there a-staring and out snakes the whip again and off comes the top button of the frock coat. Still the same. Out snakes the whip again, tip flicking neat and precise for the next button, and up comes one of Parson Pem's big hands and grabs the tip and yanks hard on it and forward and down into the dust goes Big Jake. He comes to his feet a-roaring and a-rushing for the tussle and suddenly he sees what he hasn't seen before, the hindside-

foremost collar around Parson Pem's neck. He roars and he bellows and he simmers down to a gurgle. "A rev'rend," he says in disgust. "A big one and the best chance for a ground-thumping in a month of freighting and it's a rev'rend." Parson Pem looks at him in equal disgust. "A heathen," he says. "A foul-mouthed and profane and benighted heathen." Big Jake lets loose again. Beats even his own best previous cussing. The oxen open their eyes and look startled and the blue smoke rises with fiery edgings and Big Jake finally gets it out. "Take off that collar," he roars. "I'll show you who's a heathen!" And Parson Pem reaches up and unhooks the collar in back and tosses it over on the broad sidewalk.

They meet with a thump that shakes buildings both sides the street. They wrap their big arms around each other and butt with their chins and heave and grunt and heave again. Parson Pem's a tough one at this kind of tussling but Big Jake's a tougher. He's used to wrastling oxen in and out of yokes and hoisting freight in and out of wagons. He heaves extra hard and swings Parson Pem off his feet and lifts him and thumps him down on the ground so that the air goes out of him in a big whoosh and he can't move for a minute or two. Big Jake looks down at him and grins some. "You're a mealy-mouth rev'rend," Big Jake says. "But you're quite a man too." Parson Pem looks up at him grim and determined and fights for breath and gets some. "You're a heathen," Parson Pem says. "A cursing profane heathen and an abomination to men's ears. But when I've knocked that out of you, you'll be a mighty man of the Lord." Big Jake plain can't believe what he's hearing from the man he's just beat and he shakes his head and snorts and stomps off into Willie Lord's saloon to clear the dust out of his throat....

That's the way it goes. Every month the same. The echoes bounce through the hills and the blue smoke rises strong with sulphur and the smell of brimstone and Garfield and Hayes appear straining over the grade and Big Jake comes along the road snaking out his whip and a-roaring and there in the middle of main street is Parson Pem reaching up to unhook that collar. Every month Parson Pem lands thumping on the ground and the air goes whoosh out of him and Big Jake stands looking down and shaking his big head in wonderment and stomps off for liquid comfort. Rest of us don't mix in. This is between those two big men and we let it be. That's how we do things in my town. Not saying we

don't have bets running on the outcome. But Parson Pem is our preacher and Big Jake is our bullwhacker and we're proud of them both. Only interfering we'd do would be to stop any outsider from interfering with them.

Then the month comes when Big Jake can't take it any more. The blue smoke is sort of thin this time and Garfield and Hayes just about crawl over the top of the grade, maybe out of habit much as anything else, and Big Jake doesn't even let a little pop out of his whip when he reaches town. Coils it slow and careful and hangs it on the lead wagon and walks over where Parson Pem is standing collarless in the middle of the street. "Rev'rend," he says, almost plaintive, "ain't there anything'll stop you tackling me every time I get here?" Parson Pem beams at him bright and cheerful. "Certainly. When you stop poisoning the air with your profanity, why then I'll put my collar on and keep it there."

Big Jake shuffles his feet and runs a big hand across his forehead and down over his face, wiping off the dust. "Rev'rend," he says, "you just don't know. In your business freighting souls to where you think they ought to go, there's no call for strong language. Not that kind anyway. But a man who whacks bulls has just plain got to cuss them. I'll lay you a straight proposition. If you can drive those critters of mine five miles and up that last grade without cussing, I'll quit it and never cuss again."

Yep. That's what turns Parson Pem into a bullwhacker for the first and maybe the only time in his life. It's early evening when Big Jake puts that proposition. It's late evening by time the rules are ready. The two of them start discussing the whys and wherefores of this cussing-no-cussing contest right there in the middle of main street. Rest of us come out from cover and join in. Look at it first as kind of a joke but see how strict earnest those two are and soon we're all the same. We name old Sandburr Sam Claggett, our sheriff, to be judge of the proceeding. With him in charge we know it'll be run right. He sets eight o'clock the next morning for the start so the oxen'll have a chance to rest and not be asked to be hauling again after already doing a day's work. Big Jake allows that seems fair to him. Old Sandburr says next he thinks there ought to be a time limit. Parson Pem agrees that's only fair and suggests two hours and Old Sandburr looks sorrowful at him and announces firm he's making it four hours, which is still less than he'd want if he was trying this himself. There's to be only one

wagon but a load on that to give it heft and they argue a bit over that. Not over the weight but over the cargo. Willie Lord offers ten barrels of whisky but Parson Pem baulks at that and they settle on ten barrels of flour. Near the end Parson Pem is squirming a little. Wrastles with his conscience and at last says he believes in doing the Lord's work by whatever means come to hand but still it only seems fair to him to let Big Jake know he's handled a whip some in his time and had experience making critters move. "What kind of critters?" Big Jake says. Parson Pem explains he's busted sod with a four-horse span when he was a-growing and he'd been a helper on a mule train heading west after graduating from his preacher-school. "Horses," Big Jake says. "Mules. It's the same's before. You just don't know...."

Come morning we're all out there to watch at the five-mile mark Old Sandburr's measured off, just about all of us including the women, who are set to do some yipping and huzzaing because they look on Parson Pem as their champion in this. He's wearing a pair of overalls borrowed from Big Jake because they're the only ones in town of a size to fit. He's bareheaded and his eyes are a-glowing and the only thing preacher-like about him is that hind-side-foremost collar he's kept on, maybe to remind him to watch his words if or when the going gets rough.

Wagon's there, ready loaded with ten barrels of flour from Jed Durkin's store. Oxen's there too. Been out there all night, pegged by good grass. They're rested and they've grazed and it's just another day to them. Big Jake's yoked them and Old Sandburr's inspected the yoking and they're standing there placid and quiet chewing their cuds and, being oxen, paying no more attention to all of us buzzing around than to a flock of flies.

Parson takes the whip and uncoils it. "Got the time?" he says. Old Sandburr checks his stem-winder and nods. "Stand back," Parson Pem says. He snakes out the whip and he does know how to handle it. Gets some nice sharp cracks out of it near the oxen's ears. "Gee, Garfield!" he shouts. "Haw, Hayes!" he yells. They don't even know he's there. He chirrups at them. Clucks at them. Tries all the starting noises he's ever heard. He whistles. Shouts. Stomps his feet. Makes the whip hum and crackle mean. Those oxen chew their cuds sleepy-eyed and don't pay any mind to him at all. He stands looking at them and there's a faint pink flush coming up his neck above that collar of his.

He walks around front and puts a rope on the lead yoke to try leading them. Pulls. Pulls hard. Garfield and Hayes grunt a bit and go on chewing their cuds. He wraps his big hands tighter around the rope and digs in his heels and heaves. Garfield opens one eye a little wider and blows soft and Hayes knows the signal and suddenly they both stretch their necks forward and the unexpected slack catches Parson Pem off balance and down he goes on his rump. He sits there staring at those oxen and the pink above his collar is darkening red and spreading on up over his face. Garfield and Hayes look at each other and to show what they think of his little annoyances they double under their front legs and plop down in the road dust to take a nap.

Up the slope where we're all standing a-watching there's a snort and something like a mixed cackle and bellow. It's Big Jake near busting his ribs with the merriment inside pushing out. Old Sandburr fixes him with a cold eye. "Rules are," Old Sandburr says, "no outside meddling of any kind. That burbling of yours adds insult to the injury those critters are doing the parson." Big Jake pushes a big fist in his mouth and subsides sort of strangling, all the same enjoying himself more'n he has since the first time the parson shed his collar to tackle him.

Parson Pem gets to his feet. Sweat's showing on him and he's breathing deep and fast. He goes up to Garfield and Hayes and unfastens his rope and you can tell by the way his fingers fumble with the knot that already he's madder'n a man who can't let some out in cussing has a right to be. He squats down on his heels in front of them and stares at them two, maybe three minutes. Then he begins.

His voice is low at first, but it's his preaching voice, the one that can carry against any wind for outdoor service, and it grows and swells deep and round as he talks and he hits each word harder and harder. "You're naught but benighted heathen too," he says to those oxen. "Benighted heathen dwelling in the darkness of ignorance and your sins testify against you. But that's not your fault. Your education's been neglected something shameful. No one's told you and no one's taught you. But it's there in the Book for all to read and for all to know. Genesis One: Twenty-eight. *Subdue it*, the Lord said to man, meaning the earth and all things upon it. *Have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.* That means you too, you four-footed loafing benighted heathen

beasts of the field. There's no escaping it for you. Stupid you are and stupider you'd like to pretend to be even than the Lord made you, but you can't mistake the meaning of those words." Parson Pem's voice is rolling out like a roaring thunder and righteous anger is putting wisps of smoke around the edges and Garfield and Hayes open their eyes and look at him. "No excuse for you now!" he roars. "I'm telling you and now you know! Dominion it is! Dominion it'll be! I'll smite ye in wrath with a continual stroke! I'll dominion ye if I have to kick each and every one of ye the whole five miles!"

Parson Pem stretches up straight and goes around and steps in by the chain behind Garfield and Hayes. He applies the toe of his right boot with plenty of power to Garfield and to Hayes in special tender spots and they both grunt surprised and lumber up to their feet. He goes back by the wagon and takes the whip and whirls it around his head and sends it out with a crack that near tears off the tip. "Dominion!" he roars and a puff of smoke floats upward. "Dominion over the beasts of the field! Get a-moving, ye benighted bulls of Balaam afore I punish ye seven times seven for your sins!" And Garfield and Hayes heave reluctant into their yoke and the others follow their lead and the wagon moves and the women with us on the slope start yipping and Parson Pem throws back his head triumphant and strides forward and Big Jake pulls his fist out of his mouth. "Sounds suspicious like cussing to me," he says. But Old Sandburr fixes him again with a cold eye. "Kind of strong in spots," Old Sandburr says, "but I listened careful. Caught nary a cussword."

Yep. Parson Pem has those critters a-moving. Keeps them moving without too much trouble. Not at first, that is. Load's light alongside what they're used to hauling and they're remembering the town's not far ahead and when they reach there they always get a grain feeding, so they plod along fair enough for them. He strides along beside, putting his feet down deliberate and matching pace to theirs, and he's recalling that the Book mentions oxen often and feeling good and sort of biblical himself because of that and cracking the whip and roaring "Dominion!" every now and then when he thinks they're hesitating some. He's so tickled with having them moving that it's quite a spell before he realizes that, being oxen, they're a-moving almighty slow. Cocks an eye at the sun and does some figuring. It took him all of half an hour to get them started. He's been a full hour, maybe a mite more, on the way and

he hasn't even reached the half-way mark. He notches up the whip-cracking and the roaring and tries to hurry the critters. That's when his troubles start again.

Making oxen move is one thing. Making them hurry is flour out of another barrel. One thing they don't take to, that's hurrying. They'll work when blasted into it, but they'll work in their own way and their own time. Parson Pem tries to hurry them and they won't hurry and the sweat starts dripping off him and he gets madder by the minute and the madder he gets the stubborner they get and they begin trying tricks on him. No sense telling all they try. Anyone's ever watched them knows the slow deliberate devilment they can do. Just a sample's the time they give him when he has to pull out so the morning mail coach with the right of way in the road ruts can go past and they pull out for him surprising willing in doing it manage to tangle their feet over the chain and just stand there looking disgusted at a driver that'll let that happen to them. Takes him better'n fifteen minutes to straighten that out and another five to get them moving again. He's a patient man but by then all the patience he packs is worn out and when he dominions them on along the road his hair's waving wild and his face is dark red and he has to send out smoke puffs mighty frequent.

All the same he's moving them along. Doing it so well that Big Jake is getting worried. He takes Old Sandburr off to one side. "Sandburr," he says, "dry weather we been having. Ain't much mud on up that grade. Would you say there was anything in the rules to stop me hurrying ahead and toting some buckets and sloshing some water in a few places?" Old Sandburr just looks at him and Big Jake shuffles his big feet. "Ain't no harm," he says, "in a man asking, is there?" Still Old Sandburr just looks at him and Big Jake shuffles his feet some more. "Well, anyhow," he says, "you keep listening close. He's building up a head of steam that's plain got to bust out in cusswords."

Big Jake's not the only one thinking that. About all of us figure the same. Then we're certain because those oxen hit the beginning of the grade and start up and feel the wagon dragging hard and they stop. Stop dead. Hunch down and droop their heads and start chewing their cuds placid and determined showing they've stopped to stay. The dominioning they've been getting's enough to move them along the near level but it won't push them up that grade and they think they've got the measure of this man driving

them and he hasn't got what it takes. For a while they're right.

Parson Pem works on them. Works hard. Tries what he's been doing right along only harder. Tries it with variations and new angles. Blasts at them. Blows at them. Sends up puffs of smoke that're acquiring a bluish tinge. They don't even twitch their ears. Tries the toe of his boot again and has to quit because he's only hurting himself. Lays the whip right on to their hides and they hunch their shoulders a bit and go on chewing. His face gets a bright purple and his neck is so fiery red you'd think that hind-side-foremost celluloid collar'd burst into flames. He throws the whip to the ground and jumps on it with both feet and tears at his hair with his hands. He glares at those oxen and he rears back his head and draws in a mighty breath and opens his mouth to let the roaring out and Big Jake and Old Sandburr lean forward intent to listen and already there's a grin starting on Big Jake's face. But the words he hears aren't what he expects. Parson Pem's voice rolls out like a thunder. "Job Six: Two and Three. *Oh that my grief were thoroughly weighed, and my calamity laid in the balances together! For now it would be heavier than the sands of the sea!*" He stretches taller and his voice rolls even louder. "Job Seven: Eleven. *Therefore I will not refrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul!*" He swoops down and grabs up the whip. His voice roars forth and the echoes begin to bounce through the hills. "Isaiah Twenty-nine: Six. *I shall visit ye with thunder, and with earthquake, and great noise, with storm and tempest, and the flame of devouring fire.*" He sends the whip humming and cracking at Garfield and Hayes and his voice roars up and a tinge of brimstone edges the air. "Jeremiah Seven: Twenty. *Behold, mine anger and my fury shall be poured forth upon this place!*" Garfield and Hayes lift their heads and their ears perk and Parson Pem's voice fills all the wide spaces with its roaring and the smoke comes not in puffs but in a steady cloud. "Chronicles One: One through Four," he roars. "*Adam, Sheth, Enosh! Kenan, Mahalaleel, Jered! Henoch, Methuselah, Lamech! Noah, Sham, Ham, and Japheth!*" And those oxen heave into the yokes and the wagon moves and they go almost jumping up that grade and Big Jake looks at Old Sandburr who shakes his head and Big Jake trudges after the wagon into town to shake Parson Pem's hand and admit he's beat. . . .

Yep. That's our preacher, the Right Reverend Pemberton Wil-

loughby. But that's our bullwhacker too. Big Jake Bannack. Maybe you ought to know how he comes out on that proposition too. Not so good at first. We don't realize that till another month's gone by and it's time for him to be in with another load. We're waiting for it and Parson Pem in particular because a barrel organ's coming for his church. The day passes and Big Jake doesn't show. All the next morning and still he doesn't show. The mail coach driver says he saw Big Jake down the road a piece and thought he seemed to be having trouble. Old Sandburr saddles up. Rides out to see what's doing. Back in less than an hour looking thoughtful. "Jake's there," he says. "Bottom of that last grade. From the look of him he's just about been pulling those wagons himself. Says he's been subduing and dominioning those critters all the way and it's mighty slow going. Can't get them to budge up the grade. He's sitting on the ground and turning pages in the Book he's bought and can't find the right place."

Old Sandburr looks around for Parson Pem but that's not needed. Parson Pem is already out climbing bareback on his mule. He goes down the road whacking it with his heels. Rest of us gather outside and watch him disappear between those two cliffs and go on down the grade. We wait. It's worth waiting for. First thing we hear is the echoes bouncing through the hills and the rumbling as they shake stones loose and start rockslides off in the distance. Then we see the smoke rising, thick and blue and floating up over the cliffs. And heaving forward in positive leaps come Garfield and Hayes over the grade and behind them the other oxen and the wagons with the organ lashed and swaying on top of the lead load and beside the wagons those two big men, with the mule tagging. They're striding along each with an arm over the other's shoulders and their heads are back and they're a-roaring: "*Adam, Sheth, Enosh! Kenan, Mahalaleel, Jered! Henoch, Methuselah, Lamech!*"

THE MIDNIGHT SEA

Ian Cameron



"The Midnight Sea" is published by
Hutchinson & Co., Ltd.

The Author

Ian Cameron, whose father was a New Zealander, was born in London and educated at Charterhouse and Corpus Christi, Oxford, where he studied history. During the Second World War he was a Swordfish pilot and went on several convoys to Russia. Now in his thirties, Mr. Cameron is married, with three sons, and lives in a 15th century cottage in Surrey. His hobbies are photography, tennis and gardening.

CHAPTER ONE

SNOW was falling over the islands of the Outer Hebrides. In the north it fell heavily; hard, brittle granules that beat like hail on to the decks of the ships in Stornoway harbour. But in the South it fell more lightly; softer, gentler flakes that turned to water the moment they settled on the braes.

By dawn the runways on Benbecula aerodrome were ankle-deep in melted snow.

The aerodrome itself was very still. Sodden, silent and apparently deserted, it lay in a miasma of water, cloud and mist. In the marshland between the runways, the flocks of dunlins and gulls, skuas and oyster-catchers slept close-packed: motionless as the flight of Coastal Command Wellingtons parked in front of the eastern hangars.

Quite suddenly the runway lights were switched on; the globes of orange-yellow, each with its refracted halo, shining like marsh gas through the mist. The birds stirred, shifted from one webbed foot to the other, fluffed up their feathers against the cold, and listened.

Down by the hangars an aircraft engine spluttered and coughed, faltered for a moment, then deepened into a pulsating roar.

The dunlins, skuas and oyster-catchers rose silently. In a great wave they passed through the golden light of the flares and flew noiselessly across the Sound to settle on Carinish and Grimsay. But the gulls were reluctant movers. Angrily they wheeled and mewed above the runways, settling at random on landing lights, wind sock and hangar roof. Only when the aircraft taxied out to the runway did they wheel complainingly away.

It was a Swordfish aircraft that came splashing through the slush: a Mark IV Swordfish of 811 Squadron. In the pilot's cockpit Lieutenant-Commander Jago, the Squadron C.O., checked his trim, mixture, fuel and flaps as he taxied towards his point of take-off. In the observer's cockpit an insignificant little man with white hair, glasses and a diffident manner sat patiently on his

parachute pack. Jago wondered if his queer little passenger knew how to adjust his safety harness.

"Are you strapped in, sir?"

"Yes. I've been strapped in some time."

So it's true, thought Jago; you *are* in a hurry, and you're not as meek and mild as you look. He swung into wind and took-off quickly, in a flurry of mist and snow.

In the observer's cockpit Captain Hugh McInnes Jardine, O.B.E., D.S.O., R.N., peered into the darkness, thinking that in thirty years the Navy had given him some strange assignments but never one that had started as mysteriously as this. He looked at his watch—one of the old-fashioned pocket variety that told one not only the time but also the day, month and year: 7.30 a.m., Tuesday, December 2nd, 1944. Just twelve hours earlier he'd been sitting down to dinner at his home on the Sussex Downs; now he was circling the Outer Hebrides, in an open biplane, with the visibility down to zero. He hoped his pilot was capable of finding the rendezvous.

The Swordfish kept low. From fifty feet Jago could just make out the wrinkled carpet of the sea. For ten minutes he headed west; then he saw them; dead ahead; the shadows of warships darkening the mist. He flashed his recognition signal, and one of the ships—an aircraft-carrier—replied with the code letters of the day, and switched on her landing lights: twelve frosted stars outlining a diminutive deck.

Five minutes later Jago had landed-on, and Captain Hugh McInnes Jardine had clambered out of the Swordfish and taken over his new command.

He at once went below, down to his cabin, down to where he knew he'd find the key to the mystery: the carrier's sailing orders. The familiar oilskin packet, heavily sealed, was lying on top of his desk. He sat down and started to read, half prepared for an anti-climax. But the orders were anything but that.

Captain Jardine was a small, slightly built man, with an untidy mop of white hair (though he was only forty-nine), a firm mouth and gentle slate-grey eyes set unusually far apart. After he had read the orders he called a conference of senior officers.

The conference was held in the wardroom. When Jardine entered he was surprised to find the room practically full—he had never known a carrier with so much gold braid aboard. He could

sense the expectancy as he walked across to the small table that stood by itself at the far end of the room.

"Sit down, gentlemen," he said.

There was a scraping of chairs, then silence.

"Most of you," he said—and his voice was pitched so low that those at the back of the room had to lean forward to hear what he was saying—"most of you came aboard the same way as I did. Secretly. At short notice. You'll have gathered then that we are a special team, brought together for a special purpose. I can now tell you what that purpose is."

He paused. "This carrier, gentlemen, will be flagship of a force that sails tomorrow to escort a convoy to Murmansk. I expect most of you have been to Murmansk before; probably you're wondering what all the fuss is about. The point is this. Our convoy is no ordinary one. In the ships we guard there'll be a specially vital cargo. The best thing, I think, would be for me to read you a few extracts from our sailing orders. Then you'll understand the importance of what we're going to do."

He pulled out a sheaf of papers and laid them on the table. In the gently swaying wardroom his voice rose and fell for the greater part of an hour. Several times he referred to a chart of the Arctic; once or twice he drew tactical diagrams.

Leading Steward Wallace, with his ear glued to the serving-hatch that connected wardroom and galley, couldn't see the chart, and he could distinguish only an occasional word. But there was one word that he heard several times—Murmansk. It was not a word that pleased him.

"Stone the crows!" he muttered. "A Roosian convoy. In the middle o' bluidy winter."

Sucking his teeth in disgust he went below to the galley; and within an hour the news that the carrier was joining a convoy to Russia had percolated to every corner of the ship.

As soon as the conference was over, Jardine went on deck. For the last hour the carrier had been zig-zagging among the islands of the Hebrides. Two destroyers had been keeping station on either flank; one of her aircraft had been circling overhead. Now Jardine stood her northward, parallel to the Scottish shore.

Soon it stopped snowing. Here, close to the coast, the sea was calm, the sky was clear and the sun was shining palely. For the rest of the morning Jardine stayed on deck, watching the fairy-

tale islands of the Hebrides drop gradually astern: Uist and Berneray, Scalpay and Fladdachain, Lewis and Skiant and Skye. Theirs was a fey, tempestuous beauty that never failed to delight him. Snow-white isles, with the tide rip flowing darkly in between, like ink spilt into the sea. And as morning gave way to afternoon a panorama of even greater beauty unfolded on the carrier's beam; the snow-capped peaks of Sutherland and Wester Ross, wreathed in cloud, mounting the eastern sky in majestic disarray.

That afternoon Jardine got to know a little of his ship and crew.

H.M.S. *Viper* was a British-built escort carrier of 16,000 tons; she had recently been refitted in the Clyde and her equipment, Jardine soon discovered, was of the latest type. Her senior and technical officers had been hand-picked; several of them had served with Jardine before. And her combined Torpedo-Bomber-Reconnaissance and Fighter Squadron (equipped with Wildcats and Swordfish) went about their flying with the minimum of fuss and the maximum of efficiency. And they'll need to be good, thought Jardine, to see us through to Murmansk.

All that day *Viper* stood to northward.

A little before three o'clock Jardine was watching the cliffs of Cape Wrath disappear into the evening haze, and thinking for no apparent reason of his son, when the Officer of the Watch came hurrying across the bridge.

"The S.M.O. would like to see you, sir. He says it's urgent."

"Ask him to come up."

A minute later the Senior Medical Officer clambered on to the bridge. He was a fair-haired R.N.V.R. commander: a Harley Street specialist before he joined the Navy.

"I'm afraid," he said, "I've bad news. An acute appendicitis: ought to be operated on at once."

"Can't you operate?"

"That can be the least of your worries, sir. The man I've got to operate on is the senior batsman."

Jardine shivered: chilled by a sudden premonition. A batsman is one of the most vital members of an aircraft-carrier's crew; without a first-class man to control the aircraft as they land-on, a carrier is hamstrung, for her planes cannot operate. They had, Jardine reflected, a tough enough mission without running into trouble before they even met the convoy. Restlessly he paced the bridge. How, with *Viper* already north of John o' Groats and

sailing under strict radio silence, could they get a replacement batsman? Once his mind was made up he acted quickly.

A little after three o'clock *Viper* heeled sharply over as she altered course. Half an hour later she came, very fast, through the boom at Scapa Flow. Before she lost way, her signal lamps were flickering urgently.

Daylight was fading; and the Royal Naval air station of Hatston, at the edge of Scapa Flow, lay cold and silent, blanketed in fine powder snow.

The sudden cough of an aircraft engine rang out across the deserted aerodrome. Gradually, as the throttle was eased open, the cough deepened to a pulsating roar; little flurries of snow scudded out behind a solitary plane; a necklace of icicles, caught in the slipstream, cascaded off a hangar roof; and sea-birds rose in shrilling protest above the snow-packed runways.

In his office Captain Galbraith listened to the aircraft warming up. The throb of its engine drove him to deeper concentration. He turned again to the signal and the four dossiers laid out on his desk. For the signal, the dossiers and the aircraft warming-up were part of the same problem. The signal—a top priority one—was from *Viper*: "Send me AT ONCE YOUR BEST, REPEAT BEST, BATSMAN" it read. The dossiers were the personal records of the four batsmen who happened to be in Hatston that afternoon. And the aircraft warming up was waiting to fly the man of his choice aboard the carrier.

But which man, Galbraith wondered, should he send?

The question, he knew, was an important one, not to be lightly decided. He had heard rumours of *Viper* and her hand-picked crew and specially trained squadron. Obviously she was off on some important mission. She would need a first-class man. His frown deepened as he studied the dossiers. They were not, he decided, a very impressive lot: an ageing lieutenant, posted to Hatston for a rest from operations; two sub-lieutenants, one recently trained, and the other with no sea-going experience; and a young lieutenant who had flown into Hatston only the evening before. This last man seemed to Galbraith the most promising. He was a Swordfish pilot who a year ago had broken his leg, and had taken a batsman's course while temporarily grounded. Now fit again, he was qualified as both batsman and pilot. Here, Galbraith decided, was his first choice.

Ten minutes later the young lieutenant was shown into his office. He was a tall, slimly built man, with greying hair (though he was still in his early twenties), a large hooked nose, a sensitive mouth and wide-apart grey eyes. Galbraith handed him the signal.

"Would you like to go?"

The young lieutenant read the signal.

"Yes, I think I would."

Galbraith studied him carefully; for some undefinable reason he suddenly wondered if his choice had been right.

"I'm not," he said, "ordering you to go. This is a special assignment: probably a dangerous one. If you don't like it, I'll find somebody else."

"I should like to go, sir."

"Right," said Galbraith. "I'll have you flown aboard."

"I could fly myself."

Galbraith considered him carefully.

"Very well. *Viper's* pulling out of harbour now. A plane's ready. If you hurry, you'll reach her before it's dark."

A squall of snow was sweeping the tarmac as the young lieutenant walked across to his plane. The wind caught at his breath, the snow hammered at his eyes; but he forced himself to look upward into the darkening sky. To seaward the horizon was a dull ochre, streaked with ribbons of grey; above the Flow a dark mass of cumulus hung poised over the anchored ships; and in the west a flaming segment of sun dipped into the blood-red sea. The day was dying angrily.

He lowered himself into the open cockpit of the Swordfish. As if from very far away he heard the Petty Officer's voice.

"Your kit's in the back, sir. Good luck!"

Then automatically he started on his pre-flight check; easing the throttle forward, noting the r.p.m.; checking his oil and fuel; flicking down the magneto switches; finally he swung the control column in a gentle clockwise circle, kicked forward on either rudder-bar, and called up Flying Control. Permission to take off came crackling into his earphones. He waved away the chocks. Two riggers scrambled forward and jerked aside the wooden blocks; then they clung to his wingtip, helping to turn the plane crosswind on to the ice-coated taxi-track that led to the end of the duty runway. As he taxied across for take-off the Swordfish slipped and slithered on the ice.

At the approach to the duty runway he halted. From the Flying Control van a green Aldis flickered out of the gathering darkness. He swung the plane into wind, pulled down his goggles and, leaning forward, opened the throttle wide.

The plane surged forward. Almost at once her tail lifted and the runway came into view—a narrowing ribbon of hard-packed snow, its outline blurred in the twilight and half obscured by an approaching squall. He felt the plane swing suddenly as the wind struck her; correcting automatically with stick and rudder, he held her down, until at sixty-five knots she lifted cleanly into the turbulent air.

He knew then that there could be no turning back. An alien fear, a premonition of things to come, suddenly took hold of him. I was a fool, he told himself, to pretend I wanted to go. The devil was thrown out of paradise for pride.

Many people on Hatston aerodrome heard, above the blustering wind, the throb of a Swordfish taking off. A few of them looked up and saw the plane disappearing to seaward in a veil of driving snow. Mostly their feelings were impersonal and ended in a forgetful shrug; but beside the control tower a girl with dark hair and sea-blue eyes stood watching long after the plane had disappeared, and listening long after its engine beat had died. She felt suddenly cold.

The Swordfish climbed to five hundred feet, then headed out to sea. It was almost dark by the time the young lieutenant picked up *Viper's* bow wave: a sliver of whiteness in the carpet of crumpled grey. Hearing the throb of his engine, the carrier had already switched on her landing lights and was swinging into wind. He saw the illuminated discs, controlled by the batsman, motioning him in to land. As always, the prospect of a carrier landing quickened his breathing; he felt the familiar pricking across the nape of his neck, the familiar sweat breaking out on his palms. He lowered his arrestor hook and concentrated on watching the bats. It's your life, he told himself, reflected in the illuminated discs.

As he dropped towards the carrier in a gentle, descending arc, the bats were steady; but when he straightened into the final approach one of them vanished. Gently he eased the throttle back; his speed dropped from sixty-five knots to sixty, and at once the bats reappeared, level and reassuring. Level and nearer—much nearer. Over his engine cowling he watched them

streaking towards him. He saw them flash downward and together in the signal to cut his engine, he jerked back the throttle and held the stick central; then the blurred outline of the flight deck fanned out before him. With a spasm of relief he felt the plane land squarely; felt the savage jerk of the arrestor wire; felt all movement die, and heard, in the moment of silence as the plane lay motionless on the flight deck, the murmuring hiss of bow waves sliding past the carrier's hull.

He climbed out of the plane. From a group of officers standing in the shadow of the island, a small slightly built man came across the deck towards him. Even in the half-light he could distinguish the two-and-a-half straight rings, the D.S.O., D.S.C. and bar, and the gold wings of a pilot. The Squadron C.O., he thought. They shook hands.

"Come on to the bridge," the C.O. said. "I'll introduce you to Commander Flying."

They picked their way over the flattened arrestor wires.

Captain Jardine watched them as they crossed the deck. He leant forward. His hands tightened suddenly on to the deck rail. Quickly he left the bridge. As he hurried below he passed the Yeoman of Signals.

"Chief," he said, "tell the new batsman to report to my cabin. At once."

The Yeoman's eyes flickered in interest.

"Aye, aye, sir."

Now what, he wondered, can have bitten the Old Man? He looked as if he'd seen a ghost.

The young lieutenant felt only a mild surprise that the Captain should want to see him at once. He might have waited, he thought, until I'd had some tea. Walking down the corridor that led for'ard from the wardroom he had no fear, no premonitions; but when he knocked on the Captain's door, and heard the well-known voice telling him to come in, the years rolled back. He opened the door, and saw his father standing with his back to the two-barred electric fire.

They talked together for an hour. They spoke of home, of their friends, of all that had happened since they had last seen each other; they spoke of the war; and lastly they spoke of the coming convoy.

"I'm afraid it won't be an easy one," Captain Jardine said.

"Russian convoys aren't usually easy."

The Captain sighed. "I wish," he said, "they'd sent me any batsman but you—for your sake," he added hurriedly.

His son flushed. "I'm considered quite a good batsman," he said.

"I didn't mean it that way."

"I'll try not to let you down, sir."

The old constraint grew up between them. For a while they spoke, like strangers, of things that neither were interested in; then the Captain went back to the bridge, and his son to find some tea.

All that night *Viper* and her destroyer escort stood northward. They moved fast, making up for the two hours they had lost in Scapa Flow. Their bow waves stood out like swathes of light; their wakes shone phosphorescent; their decks glowed silver in the moonlight that came flooding down from a sky which was clear and cold.

And ninety miles to the north, in sea lanes guarded by mine-belts and patrolled by shore-based Liberators of Coastal Command, the merchantmen bound for Murmansk were beginning to assemble.

CHAPTER TWO

THE sun rose next morning into a cloudless sky. The sea was calm as a dew pond, the air keen as a surgeon's knife. And it was cold; already the thermometer on the bridge was recording twenty-seven degrees of frost.

A few minutes after sunrise the convoy was sighted: a smudge of darkness on the northern horizon.

At first the vessels looked lost and anonymous; papier-mâché silhouettes dwarfed by the immensity of sea and sky. But gradually the blurred outline of their hulls took on detail and individual shape. Challenge and recognition signals started to flash across the sunlit water, and soon *Viper* was easing into position in the centre of the waiting ships. Bells tinkled, screws threshed at the water and the convoy stood northward for Murmansk.

It was a small but well-ordered convoy that left the assembly box that morning. From *Viper's* bridge Jardine surveyed the vessels whose safety in the weeks ahead lay in his hands. The merchantmen, he decided, were a good-looking lot: biggish

vessels most of them, and new, but not too new. They kept good station in three parallel columns. They made no smoke. They could all make twelve and a half knots. The warships looked reliable; and he knew most of their commanders—men whose experience had been won in the hard proving-ground of the North Atlantic. They, too, kept station accurately, without fuss. In the centre *Viper* and her attendant destroyer; spaced out around the perimeter the cruisers, destroyers and corvettes; five miles ahead the fanned-out destroyer screen; three miles astern “tail-end Charlie”, a solitary corvette.

Throughout the morning Jardine stayed on deck, watching his ships slide effortlessly through a sea that was smooth as glass. Hour after hour they headed north, watched by a blood-red sun that crawled low along the horizon. Watched too by a shore-based Liberator of Coastal Command, a great unwieldy aircraft that circled low over the advancing ships, the sunlight glinting redly on her wings and fuselage.

And while the Liberator was providing air cover, *Viper's* pilots and observers were being briefed in the crewroom by Commander Stone, the Air Operations Officer.

Stone was a tall, good-looking man of indefinable age: at twenty he had looked thirty; at forty he would still look thirty. Suave and softly spoken, his manners were perfect as any Flag Lieutenant's, and he had the additional advantage of having brains.

He spoke quietly to the thirty-odd pilots and observers who formed the aircrew of 811 squadron. He told them how important the convoy was; how much the top-secret equipment—“my unofficial guess is that it's some sort of Radar”—was needed by the Russians; how the powers-that-be suspected that German Intelligence had got to know the equipment was being sent, and how Hitler himself was said to have given orders for it to be stopped—at any price—from getting through.

“So if,” he said, “the convoy is spotted, the Germans will throw everything they've got at us. Aircraft. Submarines. Surface forces. The lot. They won't mind what their losses are, as long as the convoy is sunk.”

He went on to explain that because of other commitments the Admiralty could give them no further help once the convoy was under way; if they got into trouble they must fight their own way out.

"And if it comes to fighting," he said, "the odds will be pretty heavily against us. I want you to look at this."

He pinned a table of comparative forces on to one of the crew-room bulkheads.

SURFACE FORCES

Allied

- 1 aircraft-carrier
- 3 light cruisers
- 8 destroyers
- 6 corvettes

German

- 1 heavy cruiser
(possibly the *Brandenberg*)
- 9-10 destroyers
- 15-20 E-boats
(operating at extreme range)

AIR FORCES

Allied

- 8 Wildcats

German

- 100-120 light bombers (Ju.88s)
- 10-20 reconnaissance planes
(Blohm & Vosses)

SUBMARINE AND ANTI-SUBMARINE FORCES

Allied

- 14 destroyers and corvettes
- 15 Swordfish

German

- 25-35 submarines in Norwegian waters
- 25-35 submarines in transit to and from N. Atlantic

For several minutes the squadron digested this in silence. Then the C.O. knocked out his pipe.

"I'll lay three to one," he said, "that if the *Brandenberg* comes out we sink her."

At noon the Liberator left the convoy to return to her base in the Shetlands. Jardine watched her dwindle to a pin-point of silver low on the southern horizon; then she disappeared. He knew then he was alone, beyond the range of any outside help; and alone he would remain for eight days and eighteen hundred miles, until Russian minesweepers guided his convoy into Kola Bay.

He watched the first of *Viper's* anti-submarine patrols take off: an archaic-looking Swordfish, so festooned with depth-charges and specialized apparatus that she seemed scarcely able to stagger off the flight deck. From now until they reached Murmansk, these Swordfish would follow each other at two-hourly intervals.

Circling the convoy in good weather and bad, in daylight and darkness, they would spot and hunt down any U-boat that surfaced within thirty miles of his ships.

All afternoon and evening the Swordfish patrols continued in easy succession. Jardine, wedged into his favourite corner of the bridge, knew the value of these uneventful hours; hours when the convoy was moving fast, and the miles that lay between them and their goal were swallowed with no apparent effort. He looked at his watch, and saw that it needed only a few minutes to midnight. It had been a good day. He'd wait, he decided, for the next Swordfish to return; then he'd turn in.

Soon the throb of the plane came to him softly out of the night. *Viper* swung into wind; an Aldis lamp flashed from her bridge, and almost at once the grey ghost-like shadow of the Swordfish came floating towards them.

Jardine wondered if his son was doing the batting. He watched the plane come drifting in, off a shallow descending turn. She was almost level with the round-down now poised over the carrier's stern. He sensed the batsman's satisfaction; knew that in a fraction of a second he'd be giving the pilot the signal to cut. He was half turning away when out of the corner of his eye he saw the plane suddenly flicker, as though caught in an air pocket. Her port wingtip dropped. Falling sideways, she toppled, out of control, straight for the catwalk.

A cry of fear rose thinly into the night. Gun crews flung themselves to the deck. But the batsman stood firm. The plane came lurching down on him. In the fraction of a second left him, he tried desperately to wave it to starboard, to align it centrally with the deck. And the pilot saw him; with a last-second flick of aileron and rudder he wrenches the Swordfish level, so that she landed safely, on the very edge of the flight deck. Her wingtips swept, at seventy miles an hour, over the batting platform. The batsman flung himself aside. But he was too late. The lower wing, with a thud that was barely noticeable and did nothing to lessen the speed of the plane, smashed through his skull. He died as they were carrying him below.

In the warmth of his cabin Jardine poured out two glasses of whisky. He passed one to his son.

"I've been thinking, Ian," he said, "about what we can do to help you. One batsman simply isn't enough."

"I'll be all right, Dad. Don't fuss!"

"The C.O. thinks that if you gave him a few lessons, he could try his hand at the daylight landings. That way you'd get some sleep."

"Batting can't be learnt in a day."

"No. But I think the C.O.'s got the only answer."

Young Jardine flushed. "You've never," he said, "had much faith in me, have you?"

"I'm not being personal." The Captain got up and began to pace the cabin. "I simply think the batting will be too much for one man—for any one man."

"I can manage."

Jardine looked at his son. I mustn't, he thought, destroy his confidence. I must keep my doubts to myself.

"Very well," he said. "If you're sure that's the way you want it...."

"Thanks, Dad. I'm quite sure."

They talked for several minutes of other things; then it was time for the next Swordfish to be landed-on, and young Jardine went hurriedly on deck.

He would, he realized, have little chance of rest in the next eight days. With the constant landing-on of patrols, he could never enjoy more than two hours' uninterrupted sleep; if the convoy ran into trouble he'd get no sleep at all. A whisper of doubt hovered at the back of his mind, but he shrugged it aside. It would be an opportunity, he told himself, to prove to his father that he had a son to be proud of. He collected his bats, and picked his way carefully over the flattened arrestor wires. Soon he heard the throb of the returning Swordfish, and saw the pale-blue navigation lights drifting toward the carrier's stern. He held his bats level, at "Steady as you come".

That night and the following day the convoy, moving fast through calm seas, headed north. The Swordfish patrols were uneventful, the Radar screens stayed blank. Soon the leading ships were crossing the 65th Parallel, only a hundred and fifty miles south of the Arctic Circle. It became steadily colder: a rating who laid his ungloved hand on the metal of a bofors gun had the skin of his palm ripped clean away. It also became darker. The sun rose at ten now and set at two, and even at midday its rays were cold as starlight.

Young Jardine rigged up a bunk for himself in the crewroom.

It was always dark in the crewroom (for aircrew going on patrol had to keep their eyes away from electric light); and he managed to cat-nap in between landings. He didn't, he told himself at the end of the second day, feel particularly tired; only a little muddled sometimes as he woke suddenly and found himself stumbling, still half asleep, on to his batwing platform.

On the bridge Captain Jardine drank cup after cup of strong, sweetened tea. His face, as he watched his son moving uncertainly across the flight deck, was expressionless. That second night he stayed on deck until it was quite late, watching the flecks of cloud drift slowly past a haloed moon. At first the stars shone brightly into a metallic sky. But a little before midnight the flecks of cloud thickened and lowered; the stars paled; the moonlight weakened, and soon a snow-wet wind was sighing out of the west.

On his way below he called at the Met. Office. Carefully he studied the weather chart, and his lips tightened. He climbed into his bunk, fully dressed. The convoy, he knew, had started well, yet he was troubled. In his dreams he saw the close thick-pencilled circles of the weather chart darken into a fantastic stormcloud that came sweeping out of the west; while to the east, massed on the edge of darkness, lay a limitless Armada—U-boats close-packed stretching to the far horizon.

On the rucked-up linen sheet his fingers curled and twisted, and he woke in the silence of 3 a.m., trembling and damp with sweat.

CHAPTER THREE

IT was on the third day out that the convoy ran into trouble.

First, the weather. Throughout the early hours of the morning the wind increased, and the cloud thickened and lowered; at five o'clock the first squall of snow came lashing across *Viper*'s flight deck; and soon the Swordfish were flying their patrols in a full blizzard, the snow as it struck the aircraft freezing into a thin veneer of ice. *Viper*, never at her best in rough weather, began to corkscrew uneasily.

A little before dawn young Jardine came sleepily on deck. *Viper* was just turning into wind preparatory to landing-on, and as she swung beam-on to the heavy seas she rolled sickeningly with a sideways-and-downward plunge that brought men's stomachs to their throat. Young Jardine found himself flung violently to the

deck. Jerked very much wide awake, he grabbed an arrestor wire. The flight deck, he realized, had suddenly become a wild tempestuous place, with spume and spray skidding across an ice-coated deck; the night had grown suddenly darker; the sea had risen, and *Viper* was pitching heavily. Scrambling to his feet, he worked his way down deck. When he reached the batting platform he found that the carrier's stern was rising and falling by a full thirty feet. Landing the aircraft on wouldn't, he thought, be easy.

And he was right. Batting that morning was a test of skill and stamina and nerve. At the end of every landing he felt increasingly exhausted; mentally and physically. But he made no mistakes; the pilots obeyed his signals, and beside him plane after plane thudded safely down, their wheels slithering awkwardly on the ice.

At dawn the Captain came on to the bridge. Sheltered from the bitter wind, he watched his snow-veiled vessels pitching silently into the heavy head sea, great plumes of spray cascading over their bows and freezing into fantastic patterns on the iron decks. The storm, in spite of its growing violence, was not unwelcome to him; for it lessened the chances of the convoy being seen. He wedged himself more firmly into his corner of the bridge. If we're not spotted in the next forty-eight hours, he thought, we'll be as good as home.

But the next two patrols put paid, in no uncertain manner, to any hope of an uneventful trip.

Maitland and Sidwell took off a little after eight o'clock. Ted Maitland was one of the squadron's oldest and most experienced pilots; a solid, thick-set Cumbrian with two children and a blue-black beard. His observer, Johnny Sidwell, was a large round-faced young man, who laughed a lot, especially when he saw other people laughing.

When they were airborne they found it was too dark for them to make out either the sea or the ships of the convoy; so Maitland watched his instruments, keeping the plane level by his artificial horizon; and Sidwell concentrated on his A.S.V.X.—their air-to-sea radar-type equipment used for locating U-boats. The A.S.V.X. was not working well. Its screen flickered with distorted shapes and echoes. Interference, thought Sidwell; probably from electronics in the air. He gave the set a peevish clout. It flickered in protest; then its screen seemed to clear and a dark mass of echoes swam plainly into view. There, he told himself, is the convoy.

Now to circle it. He flicked on his radio. "Ted," he called. "Steer 095."

The plane banked to starboard, turning on to its new course; and as it turned it sideslipped into a little air pocket. Sidwell's chart-board clattered to the floor; when he picked it up he failed to notice it was upside-down. And on that the fate of the convoy turned.

For two hours Maitland and Sidwell circled the patch of echoes, which remained clearly in the centre of their screen. After two hours, their patrol finished, they turned into the centre of the area they had been circling. They expected to find the convoy easily, for it was getting light; but of the vessels they thought they had been circling there was no sign; they saw no smudges of smoke, no bow waves, nothing but a frightening emptiness of wind and sea and sky. Somehow the convoy had vanished, and they knew that unless they found it they would die.

They began a square-search. And almost at once Sidwell's eyes, like mercury to a magnet, were drawn to his radio. It would be so simple to call the carrier for a homing. So simple, but so disastrous. For if Sidwell used the radio, even for a couple of seconds, he knew what the price would be: his transmission would be picked up by listening posts along the Norwegian coast; the Germans would put two and two together and the secret convoy would be no secret any more. He moistened his lips, and for the fifth time checked his navigational plot. It never occurred to him that his mistake was as simple as having his chart-board upside down.

The sky grew lighter; but the cloud remained heavy and low, and visibility was never more than a couple of thousand yards. They covered a fair-sized area in their search—some sixty to seventy square miles—but there was no sign of the convoy; and to the steady throb of the Swordfish engine, the minutes, their petrol, and their expectation of life drained inexorably away. It was all the harder because they had so much time to think. All the harder because both knew that by switching their radio to transmit for perhaps five seconds they could save their lives.

After about an hour the engine spluttered and coughed, and Maitland switched on to the reserve fuel tank. They knew then that they had less than twenty minutes to live. Sidwell felt little rivulets of sweat trickling from under his armpits. His mouth was dry. His heart fluttered like an imprisoned bird. The fluttering was more than he could bear.

"Ted!" he called.

"Yes?"

"We've only one chance. I'll call *Viper*."

"No. We can't do that."

It was said so simply and so finally that there was no room left for argument.

Men who are not themselves congenitally brave can sometimes draw courage from the strength of others. Sidwell unhooked his Very pistol, and with its barrel smashed the transmitting switch off the face of his radio.

They flew on in silence; anything they said seemed so very trivial now. Eventually the engine spluttered and cut dead.

Ted Maitland was a good pilot. But the sea was rough, and the plane ditched heavily. They managed to scramble out of the fuselage before it sank, but the wing containing their rubber dinghy broke off and drifted away before they could reach it. They watched it for several minutes, bobbing merrily from wave-crest to wave-crest; then it dipped out of sight. For a little while their mae-wests kept them afloat, but the water was very cold, and they did not live for long.

In *Viper's* Operations Room Jardine and Stone stood watching the radar screen. On it they saw the Swordfish, a lonely pin-point of light that instead of circling the convoy went spiralling away to the south. Jardine felt slightly sick.

"Where," he said, "does he think he's going?"

Stone looked at the weather chart.

"I'm afraid he's following a cloud, sir. An electric cloud can make an echo on A.S.V.X. that looks very like a group of ships. He must be circling a cloud instead of the convoy."

"There's not much hope for him, is there?"

"No."

"Will he use his radio?"

"I should say probably not."

Jardine picked up a cloth, walked across the Operations Room, and wiped Maitland's and Sidwell's names off the list of aircrew.

"The convoy's unprotected," he said. "Fly off another Swordfish."

The convoy was without its patrolling plane for less than a quarter of an hour. But in that time the mischief was done. For

fifteen miles ahead of the convoy a U-boat had broken surface.

And so as soon as the next Swordfish became airborne, a small pear-shaped blip appeared on the screen of its A.S.V.X. For several seconds the Swordfish observer stared at it in disbelief. (Things were happening too fast for him. Ten minutes ago he and his pilot had been sitting in the warmth of the crewroom playing liar dice; now, it seemed, they were about to plunge into an Arctic U-boat hunt.) He flicked his radio to intercom.

"Jock! There's an echo dead head. Range ten miles. Looks like a sub."

Jock MacArthur swore softly. The U-boat couldn't have surfaced at a more awkward time or place; in the few minutes that the convoy had been unguarded she had managed to take up—by accident or design—an ideal scouting position. Soon she'd pick up the advancing vessels on her hydrophones; soon she'd be calling up her base with the news that a convoy was at sea. The convoy had only one chance, it seemed to MacArthur, of avoiding discovery. They must sink the U-boat. And sink it quickly.

They decided to go straight in.

In the low cloud and the heavy driving snow their target was invisible to the human eye. But the eye of the A.S.V.X. picked it out with startling clarity: the one pin-point of light in a thousand square miles of sea. Steering a succession of courses called through by his observer, MacArthur skirted the U-boat, manœuvring into a position from which he could attack down-wind. It took them ten precious minutes to get into position; then, with a thirty-five-knot wind behind them, they swept in to the attack.

Visibility was poor; and MacArthur, as he peered over his engine cowling could see little except the dark veils of snow, peltting seaward out of the banks of cloud. He could only trust his observer's courses, and try to steer them accurately. Every few seconds these courses came crackling into his earphones.

"Course 160°. Range four miles."

A squall of snow plastered across his windshield.

"Course 170°. Range three miles. Can't you see her yet?"

"I can't see a damn thing."

"Course 165°. Range two miles."

Then, over the rim of his engine cowling, he saw her; a sliver of metallic grey, dwarfed by the immensity of sky and sea.

"I've got her," he cried, "dead ahead. Reckon she hasn't seen us."

But even as he spoke a thin ribbon of tracer swam slowly up. It

seemed at first to leave the U-boat in a gentle, almost lazy stream; then as it neared them it accelerated sharply, until with a vicious crack it flashed beneath their starboard wing. The U-boat, it seemed, had no intentions of diving; she was staying to fight it out. MacArthur knocked his depth-charge switches to "live", and tipped the Swordfish into a shallow, corkscrewing dive.

Twice, in five-second bursts, tracer spat around them; the first stream passed a little to starboard, the second well to port. Then a long steady burst came directly at them. MacArthur crossed his controls; the Swordfish sideslipped violently; the wind tore sideways into the cockpit, and the tracer streaked inches below them. When they straightened out they were less than three hundred yards from the U-boat. MacArthur reached for his depth-charge release button.

Then the rockets hit them.

Watching the U-boat grow larger in his sights MacArthur saw a sudden burst of flame from aft of her conning tower. A second later a salvo of blazing meteors tore into the plane. He realized, too late, that the U-boat was equipped with the latest rocket-type ack-ack. The Swordfish shuddered as three thirty-pound rocket heads splintered her starboard wing; she toppled seaward. Desperately MacArthur wrenched her level, and aimed her straight at the U-boat. He saw the tracer coming again, flickering straight at his eyes. He tried to sideslip, but the plane no longer answered her controls. He felt her jerk and shudder as a hail of explosive bullets smacked into the engine. An artery of glutinous oil pulsated out, splintering the windshield, cascading into the cockpit. He was still trying to hold the plane on course when the rockets hit her again, ripping into her belly, toppling her seaward.

A ribbon of pain seared through his arm. He saw the horizon cartwheel crazily; saw the dark silhouette of the U-boat toppling out of his sights. He jabbed at his release button. The four depth-charges plummeted seaward. Then the Swordfish hit the water. She hit it obliquely, along the reverse crest of a wave; and as luck would have it she hit it flat, with the smooth under-surface of her lower wing (her undercarriage had been shot clean away). She bounced a full two hundred yards from wave-crest to wave-crest; then, a quarter of a mile from the U-boat, she belly-flopped into the sea. Spirals of steam from her burning engine rose into the air; and almost at once she began to sink.

MacArthur was dazed by the impact of ditching. His left arm

hanging uselessly, he fumbled with his safety harness as the water came swirling into the cockpit. He had just worked himself free when the depth-charges detonated. Four mushrooms of water heaved skyward a little in front of the U-boat. Underwater waves, like ripples from a stone thrown into a pond, pulsated outward. Caught in these, the Swordfish rocked violently; her nose dipped under, and in a little vortex of churned-up sea she sank. But in the few seconds before she went under MacArthur's observer had freed their dinghy, and into its inflating folds he dragged his half-conscious pilot. Panting, sodden and half frozen, they huddled together on the sea-wet deck-boards.

The dinghy spun about uneasily; it shipped vast quantities of water; every few seconds the ice-cold waves came flooding over their gunwale. But at last the observer managed to tip out their drogue anchor; the dinghy turned head into sea and began to ride more easily.

Then they remembered the U-boat.

MacArthur spotted her first; still on the surface, about a third of a mile away. It was impossible to tell from where they were how badly—if at all—she was damaged; but she seemed to be moving slowly, and her deck was crowded with men. Several of the men were clustered round something that looked like a gun; and it seemed to MacArthur as if the barrel was being swung towards them.

After the depth-charges hit the water there was a second of silence; the roar of the plane, the clatter of tracer and the flare and crack of rockets died simultaneously away; and in the sudden quiet the U-boat crew heard the gentle slap of waves swirling against their sea-wet deck.

Then the depth-charges detonated. They burst too far in front of the U-boat to destroy her, but near enough to cripple her. A deluge of spray swept her deck. She rocked violently. Two of her gun-crew lost their footing and fell into the churned-up sea; only one clambered back. A section of her armour-plating buckled slightly; a thin trickle of water seeped into her hull, and her port screw twisted out of alignment.

As the fountains of spray subsided, the U-boat captain stumbled aft to the conning tower.

"Leutenant Bruckner!" His voice rose loud and harsh in the silence that followed the explosions. "Call Trondheim. Tell them a carrier is at sea. Tell them——"

There was a sudden commotion at the base of the conning tower, and a seaman covered in oil forced his way on deck. His eyes were frightened.

"Herr Kapitan!" He wiped the oil from his mouth. "The aft torpedo bay is flooding fast."

Ten minutes later when they had assessed the damage, they found that the U-boat could neither dive, hold course, nor make full speed. She could move only along the surface, very slowly, in a wide erratic circle. She was still on the surface when her hydrophones picked up the destroyers of the advanced screen. Her captain knew then that this was his last voyage. As he stood irresolute, a seaman plucked at his arm.

"Herr Kapitan!" He pointed to the dinghy. "I think they are just within range."

The same thought had evidently crossed the mind of one of the U-boat's gun-crew, a thickset, bearded seaman who had heaved the machine-gun off its high-angle mounting and was setting it up on deck. The captain looked first at the dinghy, then at the seaman; the man's eyes as he squinted through the gun-sights were dark with anger. For a moment the captain was undecided; then he moved quickly across to the machine-gun and knocked its barrel aside.

"No," he said. "Let them be."

It was a few minutes after this that the U-boat was picked up by a destroyer of the advanced screen. Soon three warships were bearing down on her as she limped at a knot and a half among the white-crested waves. The U-boat fought savagely, but without hope; the destroyers had little difficulty in sinking her by gunfire at a range of eleven hundred yards. But by then her radio had been transmitting for a good quarter of an hour; and at several listening posts along the Norwegian coast her signals had been picked up.

Throughout occupied Norway wires hummed across mountain and fjord with the news that a carrier was at sea. Top-priority telephone messages were passed between Berlin, Berchtesgaden and the Norwegian High Command, and soon the Station Commander at the newly built German aerodrome at Mosjoen received a personal signal from the Führer.

"If the carrier escorts a convoy," the signal read, "every ship is to be obliterated. No matter what the cost."

The Station Commander picked up his telephone.

"Leutenant Weilen!"

"Yes, Herr Kommandant?"

"How many planes have we on the convoy search?"

"Three. And three standing by."

"Widen and intensify the search. Put on another nine planes."

"But Herr Kommandant! We only—"

"That is an order, Leutenant."

He smiled as he put the telephone down. Knowing the forces at his disposal he had every confidence that the Führer's order would be carried out.

After the destroyers had sunk the U-boat they spent some time searching among the flotsam for survivors. They picked up seven —two of whom were wounded; they also collected some interesting pieces of wreckage which they thought might intrigue the experts.

They were about to return to the convoy, when they spotted the Swordfish dinghy.

A destroyer came quickly alongside. Ropes were thrown; and after several attempts a three-inch manila line fell flush across the dinghy's bow. But the men who lay huddled on the deck-boards never moved: not even when another line fell directly across them. The destroyer crew thought they must be dead. But when a boat had been lowered, and the men hauled into it, it was found that they were not dead (though very near to it); they were unconscious and frozen literally stiff. Their clothes had to be cut away from them; and for several hours their lives hung in the balance. But in the warmth of the destroyer's sick bay they eventually thawed out. That night their breathing became stronger, and the blood flowed back into their limbs; within forty-eight hours they were sitting up in their bunks, drinking a mixture of broth and rum; and after that their recovery was only a matter of time. For several days MacArthur expected to lose his arm, which had been shattered by tracer and now threatened to turn gangrenous; but in the end the arm too was saved. So they survived: two of the few members of 811 Squadron who lived to see the Russian shore.

Jardine moved restlessly about the bridge. Gone were the sunlit hours of yesterday; gone was his optimism. Within an hour, two of his aircraft had been lost; his convoy had been discovered; and the weather was deteriorating fast. He remembered his dreams; a sense

of prophetic foreboding came suddenly over him. He decided to broadcast to the ship's company.

"Attention! Attention!" The Master at Arms' voice grated into the tannoy, and a moment later Jardine was broadcasting to the ship.

"I think it likely," he said, "that the Germans have got to know we are at sea. We must therefore expect to be attacked at any moment by either U-boats or aircraft, and I'm bringing the carrier to first-degree readiness.

"As you know, we've been entrusted with the protection of a very special convoy. What happens to it in the next few days will depend very largely on the skill and devotion to duty of this ship's company. I know I can rely on every one of you to pull his weight."

The tannoy clicked off; and over the carrier there settled an uneasy silence, broken only by the dull roar of the increasing wind and the thud of *Viper*'s bows as she pitched into the mounting head swell. Through the short arctic day and well into the night the carrier remained on the alert. Her lookout scanned the lowering horizon with extra vigilance, her radar and asdic sets were tuned with special care. But the enemy never came.

As soon as the U-boat had been reported, Jardine altered the convoy's course, and increased speed in an effort to clear the area likely to be searched. And when by nine o'clock that evening no attack had developed there were some who thought that the danger had passed. Jardine did not agree. In spite of the thirty-knot wind and the squalls of driving snow, he kept his Swordfish circling the convoy. Not until midnight did he return the ship to normal routine; and even then he kept an anti-submarine patrol in the air.

Flying in such conditions was a calculated risk. But better, thought Jardine, have one or even two planes crash on landing than have the convoy surprised by a pack of U-boats. He realized that if a plane did crash, it might easily kill his son. This knowledge turned each landing into a special sort of hell; but it in no way affected his decision to keep his planes in the air.

The hours passed. The planes took off; they circled the carrier; they landed-on. Landing wasn't easy. One plane shattered her oleo leg and slewed half across the flight deck. Another missed the first five arrestor wires, and was only jerked to a halt by the sixth, within inches of the barrier. But there was no serious accident.

Eventually Captain Jardine went below. Fully dressed, he climbed into his bunk. He twisted the voice-pipe from the Air

Operations Room to within a few inches of his ear, and tried to will himself to sleep. But sleep didn't come easily; and even when he did at last drift into semi-oblivion, his dreams were troubled, were haunted by the throb of Swordfish returning, like moths to a candle, to *Viper's* flight deck. There were too many of them for his son to land. The sweat gathered across his forehead, then ran in little droplets into his mouth.

Hour after hour, in high wind and heavy squalls of snow, the planes circled the convoy. Each patrol was as uneventful as the last. Hour after hour the aircraft and U-boat plots lay empty side by side; and next to them the radar screen flickered white and empty, like the panel of a badly tuned television set. But in the small hours of the morning there crawled on to the radar screen a tiny pinhead of light. It appeared first in the bottom right-hand corner; then very slowly it began to edge toward the centre. Stone watched it for a couple of minutes, then reached for his voice-pipe.

The Captain answered at once.

"What is it, Ops?"

"Unidentified aircraft, sir. Heading directly for us."

"What's the range?"

"Fifty to fifty-five miles."

"I'll be up."

CHAPTER FOUR

JARDINE and Stone stood watching the radar screen. On it the pinpoint of light—the image of the searching aircraft—edged slowly toward the convoy. To start with it seemed as if the plane might pass a little ahead of the ships; but when it was about ten miles distant it altered course and headed more exactly toward them. Stone clicked his tongue.

"He's seen us," he muttered.

Jardine nodded.

Five minutes later the point of light hung motionless in the centre of the radar screen. Jardine and Stone looked at each other. All their care, all their secrecy, had been in vain. The convoy was discovered.

A telephone tinkled faintly and Jardine picked it up.

"Yes?"

"Bridge here, sir. Enemy aircraft directly overhead."

"Can you see her?"

"No, sir. She's above cloud."

"Tell the First Lieutenant I'll be up."

On deck it was numbingly cold, with a blustering north-west wind. The duty watch, as they stamped their feet and flexed their half-frozen toes and fingers, could hear high above them the syncopated beat of aircraft engines. They knew that through breaks in the cloud the German pilot would be counting the ships in the convoy, identifying the warships of the escort, reporting back their position, course and speed. And there was nothing they could do about it. For *Viper* had no night fighters.

Jardine clambered on to the bridge. Together he and the First Lieutenant stared at a sky that vibrated with the mocking beat of engines. Both knew that unless their shadower was shaken off the convoy was in for trouble.

There seemed little chance of losing her; but at least, thought Jardine, they could try. He watched the sky, and after about ten minutes ordered an alteration of course. One after another the merchantmen and warships heeled over and headed for a patch of moonlit sea that lay beneath a rift in the cloud. As they moved out of the shadows, each vessel in turn became bathed in silver light. Their gun crews stood by expectantly as above them drifted an expanse of open sky. But the aircraft saw its danger; its engine beat deepened, and increasing speed it forged ahead, avoiding the clear sky and taking cover on the fringe of a distant belt of cloud. From there it continued to shadow the convoy.

Jardine sighed.

An hour later they passed under a mass of low, especially heavy, cumulus. Again Jardine ordered an alteration of course; again the ships turned. This time they ran down-wind, close-packed beneath the rolling folds of darkness. But the belt of cumulus was not wide enough to hide them; the shadowing aircraft crisscrossed it, and observed them first from one edge then from the other. The third time the plane passed overhead, the *Atalanta*, the only warship of the escort equipped with radar-controlled ack-ack, opened up with sighting tracer. Guided by the golden flecks that stabbed skyward, every vessel fired a blind half-minute burst into the cloud. The barrage was more noisy than effective; its only result was that their shadower—a Blom and Voss flying-boat from Mosjoen—became more cautious. It climbed to nine thousand

feet, and veered off behind a cloud-bank. From there, like a hovering vulture, it continued to watch the convoy. And back to its base it passed a steady stream of reports. Soon the convoy had no secret left: its course, its speed, its composition; all had been radioed back to the German High Command.

Restlessly, Jardine paced the bridge. Oh, he thought, for a single night fighter! Just for half an hour. He brought *Viper* into wind to land a returning Swordfish.

He had been so preoccupied with trying to shake off the shadowing aircraft that he had quite forgotten his son. The sight of the hunched-up figure as it stumbled across the flight deck was like the probing of a knife at some forgotten wound.

But he needn't have worried. For young Jardine was not—as yet—in particular need of sympathy. He was a man with a great deal of nervous energy, and this, coupled with his determination to prove himself to his father, kept tiredness for the time being at bay. But the tiredness, although he did not realize it, was there, mounting at the back of his brain like flood water behind a dam. Already the strain and the lack of sleep were beginning to tell, and he was landing the planes automatically, in a semi-conscious haze. Because he was a good batsman and the pilots were good pilots, this for the present was enough; but it meant that he was ill-equipped to deal with an emergency.

After he had landed the Swordfish he stayed on deck, chatting for several minutes to the cat-walk gun crews. All the time they were talking they could hear, throbbing among the belts of clouds, the unnerving beat of the flying-boat's engines. The knowledge that every move they made was being watched and reported made them feel vulnerable, defenceless. Soon they heard the rumble and hiss of the lift. Another Swordfish, young Jardine thought, being brought on deck. But he was wrong. Out of the hangar there emerged not the Emmett-like outline of a Swordfish but the squat bulk of a Wildcat. For several seconds young Jardine stared at the Wildcat as though it were some strange and unfamiliar insect; then the significance of it coming on deck seeped slowly into his brain. Muttering to himself he hurried below.

In the crewroom he found Lieutenant Maybank, the Senior Fighter Pilot, clipping on an oxygen mask. Watching him was the C.O. They were arguing.

"It's not worth it," Marsden was saying, "you wouldn't stand a chance."

Maybank went on testing his oxygen mask.

"And you can stop fiddling with that. I shan't let you go."

Maybank grinned.

"I've already seen the Old Man," he said.

Marsden turned away. He knew the near-impossibility of night-flying a fighter without specialized instruments; he knew the fallibility in darkness of human eyesight and judgment; he knew how difficult it would be for Maybank to sight, let alone shoot down, the shadowing aircraft; and he knew that even if he did manage to shoot it down he would stand very little chance of landing on. He appealed to young Jardine.

"Don't you agree, Bats," he said, "it's a crack-brained scheme? All the odds are against it."

"Yes," said young Jardine. "Like Thermopylae."

From his plane ranged on the extremity of the flight deck Maybank looked into the darkness and was afraid. He could see nothing. He was annoyed to find he was trembling and his mouth was dry. But as *Viper* dropped astern of the convoy and began to swing into wind, his trembling stopped. An Aldis lamp flashed from the bridge.

He eased the throttle open until the plane hung quivering against her brakes. Then he released her. She leapt forward. The blurred outline of the flight deck tilted into indeterminate focus. Beyond it was solid blackness. Fear pricked up the hair on Maybank's neck, as at eighty knots the plane tore skidding down the deck. He missed the island by a couple of feet, plummeted over the bow, then rose in a screaming climb towards the stars. His eyes flickered desperately from instruments they could not read to the darkness they could not penetrate. He felt the Wildcat begin to tremble. Realizing she was about to stall, he jerked the stick forward. Too far forward. Seconds later the controls stiffened; the plane was screaming seaward in a tight spiral turn. He blacked out as he managed to level off, only fifty feet from the sea.

For ten desperate minutes he fought to master the Wildcat. Then very gradually, and more by instinct than skill, he began to bring her under control. Slowly, as his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, the night took on a recognizable shape. Beneath him he saw a glint of silver: moonlight reflected on the sea. Ahead, the deepest grey took on the outline of a heavy mass of cumulus. To starboard he recognized the lighter grey as open sky, shot with

anaemic stars. By shining a torch on to his instrument panel he saw he was climbing northward, coming up to seven thousand feet. He turned on his oxygen.

In *Viper's* Fighter Direction Office, the tracks of the fighter and the seaplane were plotted with exact precision. As soon as he saw the Wildcat was under control, the F.D.O. called Maybank up.

"Hullo Jaybird One. Treetop calling. How much can you see?"

"Hullo Treetop. Not very much."

"Hullo Jaybird. Can you steer a course?"

"Hullo Treetop. I can try."

"Hullo Jaybird. Steer 010°. Keep climbing to angels ten."

In a gentle arc the Wildcat turned on to her new course, and a few minutes later Maybank levelled off. He was flying away from the convoy now, parallel to a cloudbank that slanted away towards the haloed moon. Soon the F.D.O. called him again, telling him to turn to starboard on to another course. And almost as soon as Maybank had acknowledged the call, the F.D.O.'s voice again crackled into his earphones.

"Hullo Jaybird. Watch eleven o'clock low. Bandit is 1,000 feet below you, down-moon, flying on the same course."

He peered over his engine cowling. Down-moon he could see more, much more: a ghostly panorama of cloud upon cloud rolling in magnificent disorder towards the southern horizon. But a little beneath him was a layer of stratocumulus: folds of swirling grey. He reached for his mouthpiece.

"Hullo Treetop. There's cloud below me. I won't be able to see her."

The reply was reassuring. "Keep looking," the F.D.O. said. "The cloud will break soon."

For several minutes he flew on, his eyes watering with the strain of probing the layers of stratocumulus. Then, quite suddenly, the cloud started to disperse; first it thinned out, then it broke into little fragments, like puffs of cigarette smoke.

"Hullo Jaybird." The F.D.O.'s voice rose in excitement. "You'll see her any second now."

Maybank leaned out of his cockpit. You're optimistic, he thought. He peered over his cowling. All he could see were the patches of pearl-grey cloud scudding backward beneath his plane. Then suddenly across one of the patches a dark, ill-defined shadow floated into view. He realized it was the silhouette of the flying-boat, outlined against the moonlit cloud. A second later he saw

the aircraft itself. He was surprised how small and unsubstantial it looked: a ghost-plane wandering the midnight sky.

Watching the plane carefully, he flicked his gun-button to "fire", and eased the Wildcat into a shallow dive. From above and astern he closed with the unsuspecting aircraft. Two thousand yards, one thousand, five hundred; then the shadow came drifting into his gunsight. Gently his thumb tightened on to the firing-button.

The Wildcat shuddered with recoil. Cannon-shell and tracer ripped into the flying-boat's wing, then splayed diagonally across her hull. Like a string-jerked marionette the German toppled sideways, then banked into a tight turn. In the diffused moonlight distances were hard to judge, and as Maybank followed her into the turn his tracer flashed a fraction outside her sharply canted wing. He wrenches the Wildcat into a tighter turn. The plane suddenly shuddered. Realizing she was about to stall he eased her level, and the flying-boat toppled out of his sights. It was half a minute before he spotted her again; she was a thousand feet below, streaking for cloud. He kicked the Wildcat into a thirty-degree dive. His hand froze on to the firing-button; and again cannon and tracer ripped into the German's hull. Maybank blacked out as, still firing, he pulled out of a dive.

When he regained consciousness a torrent of jet-black smoke was curtaining off the moon, and the flying-boat was spinning crazily toward the sea. Torch-like banners of flame were streaming out of her engines. She struck the water awkwardly. Her torn-off wings were flung high into the air, and for three-quarters of a mile her fuselage jerked and cartwheeled along the crests of the waves. Then her fuel tanks burst. Petrol was spewed out; and flames of indigo and blue leapt out of the burning sea.

Maybank shut his eyes. There, he thought, but for the grace of God, go I.

Flying back to the carrier he felt no elation, no satisfaction. The burning sea haunted his memory. He felt cold, depressed and desperately tired. He was flying the Wildcat almost carelessly now; twice he found himself wandering off course, once he stalled and nearly flicked into a spin. But when he reached the convoy and saw the landing lights of the carrier he managed to force himself back to a state of keyed-up concentration.

It was snowing hard as he flew low over the carrier. He was told to circle until the weather cleared. The delay frayed at his nerves.

It also frayed at young Jardine's.

From his batting platform he could hear the harsh staccato beat of the Wildcat's engines; but of the plane itself there was no sign. At last the snow eased off. *Viper* swung into wind; young Jardine picked up his bats; and the damage control ratings and the asbestos-coated fire-fighters came crowding into the catwalks. The carrier was very quiet, as slowly out of the night, the Wildcat came drifting in. It was as if the ship herself was holding her breath.

Twice Maybank approached too low and too fast; and twice Jardine had to wave him off. Then came another flurry of snow. The strain was beginning to tell on young Jardine. He stood on the exposed batting platform, shivering; his bats hung inertly; snow plastered the back of his neck; the sweat on his forehead froze into little globules of ice. This can't, he thought, go on; next time I'll have to get him down. And as if his prayer had been answered, Maybank's third approach was better.

To Captain Jardine, watching from the bridge, it seemed right up to the last fraction of a second that the miracle was going to happen. He saw the plane come drifting in off a shallow descending turn. Soon she was almost level with the round-down, poised over the carrier's stern. He sensed his son's satisfaction, knew that any second now he would be giving Maybank the signal to cut. Then out of the corner of his eye he saw the plane suddenly flicker, as though caught in an air pocket. He saw her port wingtip drop. He saw her fall straight on top of the batting platform. He flung an arm across his eyes.

There was a shout of fear. Gun crews and handling party dived for the deck. Young Jardine saw the Wildcat come tumbling out of the sky. Dropping his bats, he too flung himself face downward. His bats—upside down—slithered into the catwalk.

Maybank had been watching those bats—the illuminated discs on which his life depended—when suddenly they vanished. In a fraction-second of indecision he couldn't think what had happened, didn't know what to do. Before he realized where he was, the Wildcat hit the deck. She hit it obliquely at eighty miles an hour, one wheel thudding on to the flight deck, the other overhanging the batting platform. Realizing, too late, what had happened Maybank tried to swing back. But his wingtip dipped into the steel-plated deck. Instantly the Wildcat flicked on to her back. In an arc of flame she slewed across the flight deck, ploughed into

the barrier, reared on to her tail, then, broken-backed, toppled into the catwalk. A sheet of white-hot flame seared out of the wreckage; one of her cannon jammed at "fire" and sprayed the island with 20 mm. cannon shell; and a flood of blazing petrol swept half the length of the flight deck. It looked for one terrible moment as if the whole of the carrier was a sea of fire.

For perhaps three seconds *Viper* was frozen silent in horror. There was no sound except the crack of cannon fire and the hiss and roar of flames. Then the tannoy blared out: "Emergency! Emergency!" the frightened voice jerked men into action. Out of the catwalks scrambled the fire-fighters. They rushed at the shattered aircraft spraying it with great gouts of foam. The flames hissed and flared, weakened and died. Behind the firefighters came the asbestos-coated rescue party, with ropes and mats and acetylene torches. Two of them scrambled on to the burning fuselage. They wrenched open the cockpit-hood. They lifted Maybank out. He was unconscious, but—miraculously—still alive. As they carried him below, the shattered Wildcat was jettisoned over the side.

With the aircraft gone and the fires damped out, the flight deck seemed suddenly very dark and very quiet, with people stumbling about uncertainly and cursing softly as they tripped over arrestor wires and broken pieces of plane. It was near the island that Captain Jardine came face to face with his son. They looked at each other. Even in the pale glow of the landing lights the Captain could see on his son's face the lines of pain, the hollow, haunted eyes. He guessed what had happened. For a second his face crumpled, then he spoke very gently.

"It wasn't your fault, Ian," he said.

Young Jardine turned away. He stumbled below. He threw himself on to his bunk. He clenched his hands; his knees he drew up to his chin. He didn't try to minimize what he had been responsible for. A lesser man would have found excuses, or shrugged the issue aside; but young Jardine faced his conscience. I killed him, he thought, as surely as if I had taken a shotgun and blown out his brains. The serpents of remorse knotted round his heart.

But it was when his thoughts shifted from Maybank to himself that his suffering really began. Then, as he thought not only of what he had done but also of why he had done it, his grief turned slowly to shame. He reminded himself that *Viper*'s other batsman had also seen an aircraft thundering towards him; the other bats-

man had saved the aircraft; but he, Jardine, had saved himself. There, he thought, is the difference between a brave man and a coward. His shame bit deeply; it tore at the very roots of his nature (and shame is more unendurable than sorrow, for the wounds of self-realization cut a man more keenly than the most poignant agonies of the heart). Alone that night in his cabin it seemed to young Jardine that the knowledge of what he had done would be with him for ever. But I could have borne it all, he thought, if it hadn't been for Father. There, he knew, was the root of his misery, the kernel of his shame: that his father's doubts about him had been justified: that at the moment of crisis he had taken the coward's way out.

He sat up and poured out a glass of water. His hand was trembling. What a lot of water, he thought, isn't going into the glass. He was trying to hold the glass steady when there was a knock on his cabin door. It was his steward. He brought a cup of cocoa, and the news that a Swordfish was due to be landed in twenty minutes. After he had handed Jardine the cocoa, he didn't leave, but stood awkwardly, shifting a little from foot to foot. At last he said:

"I thought you'd like to know, sir, I've just been down to Sick Bay. The M.O. thinks Lieutenant Maybank's going to be all right."

Jardine stopped trembling.

"Thank you," he whispered, "for telling me that. Thank you very much."

He looked at the man curiously. He knew nothing about him; couldn't even remember his name.

"I didn't know," he said, "you were Lieutenant Maybank's steward too."

"I'm not, sir. I just thought you'd like to know."

Jardine was moved. The little act of kindness brought him comfort, brought a glow of warmth to the cold places of his heart. But almost at once the glow faded and died; of course, he thought, he doesn't know what really happened.

After drinking his cocoa, he went slowly up to the crewroom. He had to go there to collect his bats; but the thought of facing the other pilots and observers appalled him. They, he thought, would know.

The crewroom was lit dimly by pale blue lights, and in the half darkness and with aircrew continually moving about, he

hoped to slip unobtrusively in and out. But it was not to be. The C.O. recognized him and came across the room.

"Ah, Bats!" he said. "You've a few minutes to spare. We've kept some coffee for you."

"I've just had some, thanks."

"Well, come and have some more. Over here."

They sat, facing each other, in a quiet corner of the room. Jardine didn't look up. He concentrated on stirring his coffee. The C.O. watched him.

"That was a bad crash," he said at last.

Jardine was silent.

"I expect it's shaken you up."

"Yes."

"You mustn't," the C.O. said, "take it too hardly. No batsman could have done more."

Jardine shook his head.

"It was my fault," he whispered.

"No, never think that. You did everything you could."

Viper rolled awkwardly as she swung into wind, and the tannoy clicked on. "Standby," came the announcement, "to land one Swordfish." Jardine picked up his bats.

"I'd better," he said, "be going."

"And when you've finished the landing we want you for a solo four."

"Thanks," said Jardine. "I'd like that."

For the rest of the night, in between landing the Swordfish, he alternately played solo and slept. He realized with a slightly hysterical relief that nobody could have seen exactly what had happened; in a carrier-landing all eyes are on the plane, and the batsman at night is invisible. So his shame would be private rather than public; a secret cross that he could bear alone. He thought at first that it would be more endurable that way. But later he was not sure. For gradually—like the poison of a secret vice—the fear that he was a coward came to obsess him; it was a fear he felt he could never escape; a secret he could never share; the tiger in his blood.

He knew too that there was one man who knew his secret: the one man he wished, above all others, to keep it from: his father.

As soon as the shadowing aircraft had been destroyed, Jardine reimposed radio silence. Then he altered course, taking the convoy

farther westward, away from the Norwegian shore. Hour after hour at top speed his ships crashed silently through heavy head seas, straining to get as far as possible from the area they had last been sighted in; for other reconnaissance aircraft, they knew, would soon take up the search.

All that night as they headed westward the weather steadily worsened; and by dawn, in spite of a reduction of speed, the vessels were shipping green water, great cataracts of foam swirling shoulder deep across their fore decks. But still the anti-submarine patrols were continued. Jardine wanted desperately—and for more reasons than one—to stop flying; but now that his convoy had been sighted the threat of U-boat attacks grew with every hour. He had no option but to keep his planes in the air.

At ten o'clock a faint lightening of the eastern sky told Jardine that behind the belts of cloud a pale anaemic sun was hoisting itself over the horizon. Sunrise was a favourite time for surprise attacks. Lookouts were doubled; gun-crews were closed up at action stations. But the half-expected U-boats and planes never came. All morning and most of the afternoon the vessels headed north-westward, undisturbed; and Jardine was beginning to think that his convoy—thanks to Maybank—had managed to escape, when, just as light was ebbing out of the sky and the mercury of the bridge thermometer was sinking below the zero mark, a Junkers reconnaissance plane swept at sea level across the convoy's bow. Ack-ack patterned the sky around her, but she escaped into the cloud.

Jardine never saw the Junkers, but he heard the gunfire, and as reports of the action were flashed back to *Viper* he became resigned to the inevitable. He knew what would happen next. He was not surprised when an hour later their radar picked up four aircraft, heading towards the convoy. By the time they heard, high above them, the throb of aircraft engines, it was quite dark.

The first plane passed directly over the convoy without sighting it. The second passed several miles astern. But the third spotted them through a rift in the cloud; she came lower; she began to circle them a little out of gun-range; she called the other aircraft back. Soon the throb of their engines filled the arctic sky, and this time Jardine knew there would be no throwing them off.

The aircraft were from Mosjoen; and throughout the night, in relays of four relieved every couple of hours, they clung to the convoy. The ships altered course and speed; their ack-ack guns

cracked open the sky; but hour after hour, above the roar of the gale and the hiss and foam of ice-black waves, the monotonous beat of the shadowing aircraft circled Jardine's ships.

The protagonists had made contact. The skirmishing was over. The battle was about to begin.

And that evening Jardine became aware that his convoy would soon have yet another adversary: the weather. His ships were now passing under an occluded front, a subsidiary belt of turbulence that radiated south-eastward out of a vast depression centred off the tip of Greenland. Even under this minor front conditions were bad; with the wind gusting to forty knots, great wide-spaced rollers sweeping over the ships, and squalls of snow being driven horizontally across the sea. But the occluded front was only a forerunner of the storm centre itself. It was a storm-centre of vast dimensions and terrible intensity (the wind at its centre was estimated at a hundred and fifteen miles an hour); and that night it began to reel south-eastward, straight for the advancing ships.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE wind increased, the sea rose, the temperature sank to minus twenty, the aircraft circled the convoy. Hour after hour the throb of their engines vibrated among the banks of cloud.

At midnight Jardine went below. He had hoped to rest until dawn, but it seemed to him that his head had barely settled on to the pillow when the whirr of a voice-pipe jerked him out of his sleep. He picked up the speaking-tube.

"Stone here, sir." The voice was puzzled, slightly apprehensive. "Twenty to thirty aircraft, heading directly for us."

"What's their range?"

"Forty miles."

"I'll come up."

Jardine rolled off his bunk. He pulled on his oilskins. Then he looked at his watch. The hands pointed to a little after 3 a.m. They aren't, he thought, wasting any time.

Viper was pitching violently as he clambered up to the bridge; twice he had to clutch at bulkheads to avoid being flung to the deck. On his way up he looked in at the Air Operations Room. On the radar screen a well-defined patch of light stood out clearly.

This, he thought, is no false alarm. This is the real thing. He looked at Stone.

"What's their range now?"

"Thirty miles."

He nodded, clambered on to the bridge and called for the First Lieutenant.

"Action Stations," he said.

Hooters loud and discordant brayed into every corner of the ship, and from bunks, hammocks, benches and chairs, from mess-decks, cabins, galleys and stores, men came tumbling out, half-awake, half-asleep, rubbing the tiredness out of their eyes, struggling into life-jackets, muttering, complaining, joking and cursing, as they flooded in a confused but purposeful mêlée towards ammunition-hoists, fire-points, and gun-platforms. Almost at once reports came streaming on to the bridge: "Gun-crews closed up . . . damage-control closed up . . . engine room closed up", and inside five minutes the carrier was at action stations.

Then, restless and slightly puzzled, Jardine paced the bridge. His convoy had been discovered, shadowed, now it was about to be attacked. But what form would the attack take? The night was dark; the sea was high with wide-spaced thirty-foot waves; the wind was a steady forty knots, gusting to over fifty in the squalls of snow. Under these conditions accurate bombing would be almost impossible; a torpedo attack would be out of the question.

The aircraft closed in. Every couple of minutes Stone relayed their bearing and range to the bridge. "Bearing 085°, range 20. . . . Bearing 080°, range 15. . . . Bearing 073°, range 10. . . ." The planes, Jardine realized, were not heading directly for them, but were passing a shade ahead. Suddenly he smiled; for the planes' direction had given him the clue he needed; he knew now what he had to face. He waited until the aircraft were very near, until the beat of their engines filled the sky; then he turned quickly to the Yeoman.

"Signal the convoy 'Emergency turn, 90° to port'."

The Aldis lights winked out.

As though jerked by the same invisible string, cruisers, merchantmen, destroyers and corvettes put over their helms. They spun round, almost on their axes; and as they turned they came beam on to the heavy seas. They rolled wickedly. The corvettes and smaller merchantmen dipped scuppers under and rose quivering, with ice-green cataracts streaming off their upper decks, but of all

the ships none rolled as wickedly as *Viper*; for, as she turned, the carrier fell into a trough; the great seas came crashing into her beam; men were flung to the deck; a lashing in the hangar parted, and the tail of a Swordfish broke loose and splintered itself to shreds; it seemed an eternity before the carrier rolled back, with a terrible vibrating shudder, on to an even keel. The convoy had barely straightened on to its new course when the cloud to starboard burst into a ruddy glow, and three parachute flares, storm-tossed and burning fiercely, came swinging out of the night. And behind the flares dropped the mines, drifting by parachute into an empty sea. The minebelt that would—but for Jardine's turn—have been laid across the convoy's bow now fell harmlessly along its flank. Along the edge of darkness the ships moved quietly forward.

The flares sputtered and died; the throb of aircraft weakened and faded; the tension relaxed. The danger, many thought, was over.

Jardine was glad to have Stone's report that the aircraft were heading back for Norway. He was glad to have one or two senior officers congratulate him on having avoided the mines so neatly. But in his mind was a core of doubt, a fragment of disbelief. It seemed strange that the attack should have been avoided so easily. In fact, he thought, it's more than strange; it's unbelievable. He kept his fears to himself—but he also kept *Viper* at action stations.

And it was not long before his fears were justified.

The first hint of further trouble was a message from the patrolling Swordfish; her observer reported they were investigating a contact dead ahead at a range of fifteen miles.

"Dead ahead," the First Lieutenant grunted. "Quite a coincidence."

Jardine nodded.

Frightening in its unexpectedness, the thud of depth-charges echoed out of the darkness, and a few seconds later the Yeoman of Signals handed Jardine an "in contact" report from a corvette of the advanced screen. And almost at the same moment the Swordfish radioed again, reporting another U-boat contact, fine on their port bow. Jardine felt a stab of fear. So, he thought, you aren't so clever after all. You've turned the convoy straight into a pack of U-boats.

He stood irresolute, hands clasping the bridge rail. His convoy was poised on the edge of disaster now. Already he had made one mistake. Another would be fatal. Possible courses of action passed

through his mind. To the west were U-boats; to the north were mines; if he turned south, he would expose the convoy's flank; if he turned east, he would hamstring his most effective weapon of defence—his aircraft—for every time he wanted to fly them off or land them on, he would have to turn *Viper* on the opposite course to the convoy. An idea, as yet vague and half formed, began to take shape. He lifted the flap of a voice-pipe.

"Met."

"Sir?"

"Captain here. Give me the surface wind. Quickly."

There was a pause, a rustling of papers, then: "280°, sir, 30 knots, gusting 45 to 50.

He snapped the voice-pipe down."

"Our best chance," he said, "is to go slap through the middle of 'em."

Young Jardine stirred in his sleep. He heard the subdued hum of conversation, the shifting of tables and chairs, and the scuffling of feet. He opened a reluctant eye and saw that the crewroom was full. He caught a glimpse of his father, walking out of the room; he must, he realized, have just finished talking to the squadron. He swung his legs over the side of his bunk.

"What's happening?" he asked.

"We've run into a pack of U-boats," Marsden told him. "The Swordfish are taking off to keep them down."

Young Jardine said nothing. He knew what would happen in the next few hours: with aircraft constantly taking-off and landing-on, he would be kept on deck; he would be batting almost continually; he would get no sleep. Yet he needed sleep desperately now, craved for it as a man in pain craves for morphia. The C.O. looked at him: saw the white face, with the little beads of sweat fringing the temples, and the tired, dark-ringed eyes. If he cracks now, he thought, the convoy's lost. He wondered if the Captain realized how much responsibility he was passing on to his son.

"Why not," he said, "go to the Ops Room? It's quieter there. You can get your head down till you're called."

"I'll do that," Jardine said.

The Operations Room was quieter than the crewroom, quieter and far less crowded. Before Jardine bedded down he took a look at the U-boat plot. There were, he noticed, already seven U-boats

close to the convoy. The position of each was marked on the plot by a black cross; the crosses were strung out in a shallow crescent ahead of the advancing ships; and some of them were very near. As he was settled down to sleep, Stone came across to the plot. In his hands were two more crosses.

"Looks like being quite a night," he said.

A roaring crescendo from the flight deck, just above their heads, told them the first of the Swordfish was taking off. And I hope, Jardine thought, you stay airborne a nice long time. Then I can get some sleep.

But in less than half an hour he felt Stone shaking him by the shoulder. The Air Operations Officer, he noticed, was looking less imperturbable than usual; and a glance at the U-boat plot told him why. There were seventeen crosses now, and they were very close.

He struggled into his oilskins and clambered on to the flight deck. It might, he knew, be a long time before he returned below. Yet, now the landing-on was about to begin, his tiredness receded a little and he felt a stir of exhilaration, a glow of response to the challenge that lay ahead. Here, he told himself as he stumbled over the flattened arrestor wires, lay his chance of atonement, his hope of expiation: in spite of darkness and snow, in spite of wind and sea, in spite of any and every adverse circumstance he was determined—somehow—to get every plane safely down.

In the few minutes before the first Swordfish returned, he gathered from the Deck Officer a confused impression of what had happened in the last half-hour.

The convoy, it seemed, had swung a few degrees to port. They were heading straight for the U-boats now; straight too into the forty-knot wind.

Young Jardine was quick to see the advantage of this; *Viper* could now fly-off and land her aircraft without altering course, without moving out of station. Already eleven Swordfish were in the air, blanketing the U-boats, keeping them down, preventing their surfacing to launch their torpedoes. But the planes, the Deck Officer told him, were having a difficult job; the U-boats were many and determined, the weather was appalling, he doubted if they could keep their offensive up. Jardine guessed what lay at the root of his doubt: the fear that many of the Swordfish would be bound to crash on landing. The Deck Officer's doubt was like a whetstone to the edge of his resolve.

A message came through from the bridge that the first plane was approaching the carrier. He walked across to the batting platform. Soon he could see the pale blue navigation lights drifting towards him. He held his bats level.

The approach was not a good one. The Swordfish came in crabwise and too fast. Jardine waved her off. I don't care, he thought, how tired you are. I don't care how many attempts you have to make. You'll have to do better than that. The engine roar deepened as the Swordfish rose, in a flurry of snow, away from the flight deck. She vanished into the night; it was several minutes before her lights appeared again, drifting towards the carrier's stern.

The second approach was no better than the first; again the aircraft came in crabwise and fast; and again Jardine waved her off. As she rose awkwardly away from the deck, a message came through for Jardine on the ship's telephone. He leant over the edge of his batting platform and picked up the receiver. He was connected through to Commander Flying.

"That you, Bats?"

"Yes, sir."

"What's wrong?"

"She's coming in too fast."

He heard a mutter of conversation from the other end of the line; then a voice, which he recognized as his father's, said, "I'll speak to him."

"Are you there, Bats?"

"Yes, sir."

"We think the Swordfish is damaged. You'll have to get her down as best you can."

Young Jardine began to tremble. So much, he thought, for my hope of bringing them all in safely; the very first one's going to crash. He moistened his lips. His mouth juddered against the mouthpiece of the telephone.

"Der-der-der-do you know how bad the damage is?"

"No. Her radio's out of action."

"Could you pur-pur-put a searchlight on her?"

"We thought of that. I daren't risk it. Not with U-boats about."

There was a pause, then the Captain said: "I'm sorry, Ian. You'll have to do the best you can. Good luck."

He heard the click as his father put down the receiver. He looked at *Viper*'s round-down and saw it rising and falling in great uneven pulsations. He looked into the night and a flurry of snow plastered

across his eyes. What chance have I got, he thought, of landing a plane that's damaged on a night like this?

Summers and James had been standing-by when the early U-boat reports came through; so they were the first crew to get away. They collected their parachutes, scrambled down the flight deck and clambered into the Swordfish parked on the carrier's stern. Summers could tell at once that things weren't going to be easy. As he was warming the aircraft up, a chock slid from under one of his wheels, and the plane slithered across the ice-coated deck; it took two dozen ratings of the flight-deck handling party to haul her back into position against the blustering wind.

The take-off itself he did on instruments, for it was too dark to see the horizon.

As soon as the plane left the deck the wind snatched at her, flinging her almost against the island. Summers had to fight desperately to keep her under control. He was appalled at the way the aircraft bucketed about, as though an unseen giant were tossing her capriciously from hand to hand. Great hammer-blows of wind battered her with insensate malevolence. His instruments went mad; the artificial horizon tilting crazily, the compass swinging like a pendulum and the altimeter rocketing up and down; and all the while there poured into the open cockpits the plastering snow and the terrible aching cold. He didn't fly the plane, he fought her; fought her with the singleness of purpose of a cow-puncher riding an untamed stallion. Grimly he forced her up to three hundred feet; then he held her on a westerly course, a course that took them over the advanced screen, towards the U-boats.

And how many U-boats there were!

On the screen of his A.S.V.X. James could see the pear-shaped shadows lying in a semi-circle ahead of the advancing ships; there were at least a dozen of them.

At their briefing Stone had given each plane a sector to patrol, so many square miles to keep free of U-boats. Their sector lay almost dead ahead. As far as James could see there was only one U-boat in it, about nine miles ahead of the convoy. He called through a course that took them directly towards it (there was no time for refinements such as attacking down-wind, and their job in any case was not so much to sink the U-boats as to put them down; and keep them down). When they got to within four miles of the U-boat, Summers took the Swordfish down to a hundred and fifty

feet. He checked his depth-charges and his star-shell release gear. He had been flying anti-submarine aircraft for over a year now. So far he had never even seen a U-boat, let alone sunk one. Tonight, he thought, my luck will change.

But he was wrong.

With the range down to a mile and a half, the shadow on James's screen began to fade. The U-boat had picked them up. She was crash-diving fast. By the time Summer's star-shell lit the sea where she had been the U-boat had vanished. They circled the area for several minutes, but she didn't reappear.

"I expect," said James, "there'll be others."

He was right. There were many others.

In the confusion of the next twenty minutes too many U-boats surfaced in their sector for them to attack them all. But they homed on two: the two nearest the convoy. The first dived while they were still a good way short. The second, braver or less vigilant, stayed on the surface until they were almost on top of her. Then at the last minute she too started to submerge. In the light of his starshell Summers thought he could see her slick—the little circle of churned-up sea marking the spot where she had dived. He flung the Swordfish seaward. But the closer he got to the slick, the less certain he became. Was it the vortex of a dive, or was it simply a patch of wind-whitened sea? At the last second he decided it was worth taking a chance; he pressed his release button, and four depth-charges, straddling the slick, scythed into the sea.

He banked away as the tall columns of water heaved skyward. Then he returned, and another salvo of starshell yellowed the sea. But they saw no wreckage; no heartening patch of oil. For five minutes they circled the area, hopefully dropping starshell and flares. But of the U-boat—if indeed there had ever been one—they saw no sign. Disappointed, their depth-charges gone, they set course for the carrier.

And almost at once, fine on their starboard bow, at a range of only three miles, another U-boat broke surface.

But all their depth-charges had gone; they had nothing left with which to attack it.

Their job, Summers knew, was to put the U-boats down. This, he argued with his observer, they could do without depth-charges. They had only to home on this latest target, and it, like the others, would dive for safety. Rather against his better judgment James agreed that the idea was worth a try.

Flying downwind they were almost on top of the U-boat before they realized what was happening, realized that this time their target wasn't crash-diving but was staying to fight. Summers held course as long as he dared, hoping to force the U-boat down; but she remained obstinately on the surface. He was very close to her before he banked the plane aside (with his depth-charges gone there was no point in flying right over the top of her). As he turned, a sudden burst of flak cracked open the sky. He thought at first that the innocent-looking bars of light were passing well beneath them. But suddenly either the U-boat rolled, deflecting her fire, or else her gunner saw the shadow of the plane; for a long burst of tracer came slashing straight for Summers's eyes. He flung the plane aside. But too late. With a splintering crash and a smell of burning cordite, the tracer tore into the Swordfish. A spate of bullets shattered her starboard landing-wheel, sliced through her wing fabric, then rose diagonally through the pilot's cockpit. They seared past Summers's face, then splattered into the instrument panel, showering the cockpit with broken glass. Summers was blinded. A sudden surge of pain wrenched at his left foot. What a stupid, unnecessary way, he thought, to get yourself shot down. Trying to pull the plane level, he kicked at the port rudder-bar. He almost fainted in agony. Looking down he saw that his left foot was a mass of bleeding pulp—the tracer had sliced off his toes and shredded away the sole of his foot. The flak was all around them now, beating into the aircraft like some terrible cosmic hail; but as the plane toppled seaward, it started to pass over the top of them, then it died away. Summers centralized the control-column. To his surprise the Swordfish levelled off. He heard his observer calling him, as if from far away. For several seconds he was too sick, too dazed, to know where the voice was coming from; then he realized that James was shouting through his gosport-tubes—the emergency voice-pipe. So their radio was out of action.

"Ted! Ted!" The voice came to him muffled and hollow.
"Are you all right?"

"Yes," he said, "I'm all right."

He looked at his foot. He felt curiously little pain—as long as he didn't touch the rudder-bar. But he felt sick: sick and dazed and weak. He wondered how much blood he was losing. He wondered if he could get back to the carrier before he fainted.

The next ten minutes seemed endless as eternity: a timeless purgatory of disappointment and difficulty and pain. If it hadn't

been for James he would have given up, given up thankfully and shut his eyes and fallen asleep and let the plane slide into the sea; the longed-for sea that would have ended all his sickness and bewilderment and pain. But James's voice, insistent and matter-of-fact, kept him alive.

"Ted! Can you steer a course?"

Summers looked at his shattered instruments.

"No," he said. "No compass."

"Mine's still O.K. Turn to port. I'll tell you when to level up."

I'm damned, Summers thought, if I'll turn to port. If I touch the port rudder I'll faint. He banked the Swordfish into a turn to starboard. After James had told him to ease out of the turn, he found he could keep the plane reasonably straight by using his artificial horizon, which alone of all his instruments seemed to be undamaged.

And so, painfully and with frequent corrections of course, they headed back for the carrier. After a while a not unpleasant drowsiness began to take hold of Summers; but again his observer's voice cut through his haze of semi-consciousness:

"What height are we, Ted?"

"I don't know."

"I think we're too high. We're above cloud."

Summers was in no mood to argue. He pushed the stick forward; the nose of the Swordfish dropped; his speed built up; he heard the wind sighing through his struts; I hope, he thought, we go straight into the sea. But when James told him to level off he automatically obeyed.

And a few minutes later they found the convoy.

Beneath his wingtip Summers saw the dark ill-defined shadow of the ships, each with its white fleck of bow-wave. He felt a flood of thankfulness, tinged with disbelief. So they had made it after all. Now he need only do one thing more—persuade James to use his parachute—then he could shut his eyes and let the waves of pain engulf him utterly. He heard his observer calling him again.

"Ted! *Viper's* on our port beam. Did you see her Aldis?"

"I saw it."

"Let's be going then."

Summers was silent. After a long time his observer asked him what was the matter. He tried desperately to fight clear of the waves of faintness that were coming now with increasing

frequency. He wanted James to bale out; for he knew their chances of making a safe landing were so slender as to be almost nil. But how to persuade him? Any attempt at subtlety was more than he felt capable of, so he simply said:

"We're too badly damaged to land. You'll have to bale out."

It was James who was silent now. Not, "we'll bale out", he thought, but "you'll bale out". He realized his pilot was wounded; realized he was offering him a chance to save himself. But I can't leave him now, he thought. By himself he wouldn't stand a chance. He'd give up too easily.

"Don't talk nonsense," he said. "Of course we can land."

Summers could have wept.

"Please, Kit," he said. "Don't be a fool. You'll be all right if you bale out. Let's not both be killed."

"Nobody's going to be killed. Pull yourself together."

Summers felt too weak to argue. He asked James to signal *Viper* by Aldis to tell her they were damaged; and when his observer told him their Aldis was shattered and they had no way of contacting the carrier, he felt no emotion whatsoever.

"We'll just have to go straight in," he said.

And James agreed.

When they were waved off the first time Summers felt angry and frustrated. He wanted to get things over—one way or another—as quickly as possible. When they were waved off the second time he felt close to tears with weakness and frustration and rage.

But James didn't let him give up.

"Have one more try," he said.

For the third time Jardine picked up his bats. He knew that no one would blame him if the Swordfish crashed; but that meant nothing; he would always wonder in his own mind if there was something else he could have done, always wonder if some other signal might have saved her. He keyed himself up, determined this third time to make a supreme effort to get her down.

He thought things out. Now he knew the plane was damaged he had something concrete to work on. Twice she had come in fast. That would mean either the plane was structurally damaged and her stalling speed increased, or else that the pilot had no air-speed indicator. The latter he decided was more likely; so he'd take the risk of slowing her down. Twice she had come in crabwise. That would mean her rudder was damaged; this was something beyond

his control, beyond the pilot's control too; so crabwise he would have to land her.

The deck had been cleared. The tannoy had blared "Emergency landing" and the fire-fighters had come scrambling into the catwalk. Silence fell over the carrier as the plane began her third approach.

It was a long, straight approach; an approach which gave batsman and pilot plenty of time to get on terms; and it was a better approach than the previous ones. Jardine realized he wasn't the only one making a superhuman effort. Poor devil, he thought, you're still coming in too fast; he moved one of his bats out of sight. And this time his signal was obeyed. The plane slowed; her tail dropped, and her "attitude" light swung into Jardine's line of vision. He held his bats level. Once he signalled the plane to drop a little lower, once to come a little more slowly; otherwise he let the pilot land himself. Soon the plane was very near, poised half-stalling high over the round-down. *Viper*'s stern swung obligingly up. Now, thought Jardine, for God's sake do as I tell you. High as she was he gave her the signal to cut, and in the same second signalled up her port wing. The roar of the engine died; the wingtip tilted level, and the plane came crashing down flush on the second arrestor wire. She hit the flight deck heavily: heavily but squarely. Her undercarriage snapped off, and she squelched on to the deck plates like an over-ripe plum falling on to crazy-paving. Bits of her shattered landing gear shot across the deck, her lower wings splintered, her back broke, and she lay smashed but mercifully still in a widening pool of petrol.

The second after she hit the deck James was tumbling out of his cockpit. But Summers did not move. The ratings who scrambled up the side of the fuselage found him slumped over his stick. His eyes were open but unseeing, his face was dead white, and at the bottom of the cockpit was a slowly widening pool of blood.

"Jesus!" one of the ratings whispered. "He's dead."

But when with the help of a doctor they hauled him out of the cockpit, they found he was not dead but had fainted—fainted at the very moment his plane had hit the deck.

In the hour after the U-boats were sighted sixteen patrols were flown. Their pattern, except in the way they ended, was much the same as Summers's. Time and again the Swordfish picked up a U-boat on their A.S.V.X. Time and again they homed on to their

target to within a couple of miles. And time and again they found that the U-boat got wind of them and dived. Not for these planes the spectacular night attack, with rockets, flares and starshells lighting up the midnight sea; only the everlasting casting round and the tantalizing unrewarded search. It was exhausting, unspectacular work; but it was because of patrols like these that the convoy began early that morning to bludgeon its way through the encircling pack.

Victory did not come easily; every mile was bitterly contested, and for a couple of hours the issue hung in the balance; but in the end the night belonged to *Viper's* Swordfish.

Most of the aircraft Stone concentrated dead ahead; so that the U-boats in front of the convoy found themselves unable to surface, unable to get a bearing on their target. Gradually they were forced aside, pushed outward on to either flank. And here they were pounced on, and pushed further outward, by the destroyers and corvettes.

But it was one thing for a carrier to launch such an air offensive, and quite another for her to maintain it hour after hour. The strain on the pilots and observers was unbelievable. And an equally heavy strain was imposed on the ratings in flight deck and hangar. For a single hold up, and Jardine's counter-offensive would have ground to a standstill; the convoy would have been left defenceless.

But there was no hold up. That night the squadron ratings worked as they had never worked before. The instant each plane touched down, they came swarming across the ice-coated deck; they held it steady against the tug of wind and tilt of deck; they disconnected its arrestor hook; they folded its wings; they manhandled it aft; they lashed it on to the lift. The hydraulics hummed and sighed; the lift sank; the aircraft vanished into the darkness between the decks. Seconds later it was unslashed and trundled into the bedlam of the brightly lit hangar. Here all was warmth and colour; here, under the garish arc lamps in an atmosphere redolent with varnish, fabric, and petrol, each aircraft was serviced, tested, re-armed, re-fuelled, and rushed back to the flight deck. Its engine was started up. Its pilot and observer came tumbling into the cockpits, and within twenty minutes of landing the plane was again in the air.

And thanks to the speed and efficiency of the turn-round, the air offensive was sustained, hour after hour.

But the work in flight deck and hangar would have been of no account if the planes had not, in the first place, landed safely. That they did so was due to young Jardine's batting.

In the first hour he landed thirteen planes, in the second hour sixteen, in the third hour the Swordfish came thudding down so frequently that he lost count. But the numbers did not matter. What did matter was that he landed all of them safely.

For the rest of that night he never left the batting platform. Before each landing began he keyed himself up to a tension close to breaking point. He sharpened his perception to a razor-edge of awareness. He watched each plane as it thundered toward him with the intentness of a hunter taking his final shot at a charging elephant. No flicker of a wingtip escaped his notice; he found a meaning for every change in the beat of an engine. He came to recognize each pilot by the style of his landing. Some, he found, liked landing off a turn; some off a straight run-in. Some had certain weaknesses; these he anticipated and allowed for. Some had a flair for doing certain types of landing especially well; these he remembered and made use of. He stood there hour after hour controlling the approaching planes until his eyes were raw with watering, and his arms ached with the weight of his bats, and his legs felt anchored to the deck by leaden weights. After the first hour he began to shiver, in sudden unexpected spasms; for the flight deck was bitterly cold. Yet its coldness was not as chilling as the fear which, each time a plane came in to land, closed round his heart. Would this, he wondered, be the one to crash? It seemed impossible that in the darkness and driving snow, in the clawing wind and tempestuous sea, plane after plane should touch down safely. Sooner or later, he felt sure, he would signal wrongly, or too slowly and another plane—like Maybank's—would shatter itself on the iron deck. It was the fear of this that gave him the strength to go on, that kept him keyed up long after the normal breaking-point of physical and mental strain had passed. That, and the thought of his father.

Several people did what they could to help; but their help could not amount to much. The Fight Deck Officer saw that he was brought hot cocoa; the M.O. helped him to change his gloves and flying-boots and kept him supplied with heat-giving kapok pads; a few of the pilots came to have a word with him—but they could not stay for long—and at the end of the third hour his father sent a message of congratulation from the bridge. That pleased him;

made him feel that his expiation was under way; strengthened his resolve not to relax.

Men who are highly strung can sometimes rise to an emergency in a way that is quite out of character. That night Jardine proved he was such a man. The strength of Atlas and the red badge of courage were—for the moment—his. And in them he rejoiced. They may, he thought, be like the harlequin costume worn at a midnight ball, borrowed accoutrements; on loan; strictly returnable at dawn. That doesn't matter. For the moment they're mine.

And while young Jardine was fighting his own personal battle on *Viper's* flight deck, in the surrounding sea a greater battle by far swelled to its climax: the clash between U-boats and Swordfish.

The U-boats were in difficulty. The fact that the convoy hadn't turned but was heading straight towards them disrupted their plans. Conditions for launching their torpedoes were appalling. Out of the darkness, the tumbling mountain-sides of water came crashing into them; within a few minutes of surfacing they became sheathed in a veneer of ice; the wind plucked men off their decks and smothered them to lifelessness in torrents of driven spume; and every time they surfaced, within a few minutes (sometimes a few seconds) they heard the hated throb of a Swordfish heading directly for them. They had only two alternatives: stay under and miss their chance of launching an attack, or stay on the surface and fight.

Some tried to compromise; tried to work their way in little dashes, surfacing for bearings in between, round to the convoy's flank. There, they hoped, the aircraft would be less active. They were right. But the depth-charges of Jardine's destroyers and corvettes were as effective as those of his Swordfish; and in the end these compromisers too were faced with the same alternative: fight or run.

Most of them stayed to fight.

Some fought with anger, some with despair, and some with cunning and skill. But the result was generally the same; they were either crippled or pushed aside or sunk.

The first U-boat to be sunk fought with anger. Her captain lay obstinately on the surface, his ack-ack manned. The first Swordfish to attack her met with a hot reception and retired with a shredded wingtip. The second Swordfish crippled her with a stick of depth-charges dropped, under heavy fire, a little too far astern to send her to the bottom. By the time the third Swordfish found her, she was

very close to the convoy; but her crew were exhausted; her fire was ragged; and the Swordfish was able to pattern her with a precisely placed stick of depth-charges that literally blew her in half.

The second U-boat to be sunk fought with despair. Her captain estimated the convoy's course and speed, dived beneath the patrolling planes, then tried to surface a little ahead of the advancing ships. But as the U-boat started to rise, he heard, bearing down on him, the engine beat of an attacking warship. He tried to dive deeper; but the corvette had him in firm Asdic contact. Two patterns of depth-charges blew his U-boat to the surface; a third broke her back and sent her, twisting and disintegrating, to the bed of the sea.

Of the others, one was sunk by a Swordfish and one by a destroyer; and five were so badly damaged that they could only limp painfully aside.

So it was that by the end of the third hour the convoy had broken through; and out of the eighteen submarines that had lain in wait for Jardine's ships, over half were left sunk or shattered in the convoy's wake.

But the price of victory was high.

Towards the end of the second hour two U-boats managed to avoid both planes and warships, managed to break through the protecting screen and launch their torpedoes.

In each case their attack was carried out quickly, under pressure, and at extreme range. In the heavy seas the torpedoes ran erratically; some sank, some ran wide. Only one found its target. But that, for some hundred and twenty men, was one too many. A corvette on the convoy's flank was hit squarely, about twenty feet from her bow. She was hit while running at high speed, and at such a spot and angle that the blast of burning air from the explosion swept straight into her ammunition locker. Before the roar of the initial explosion had died, another and more terrible sound rang out: a single long-drawn boo-oo-oo-oom that echoed in hollow diminuendo among the banks of cloud. A destroyer, disregarding its own safety and Jardine's orders, switched on a searchlight. The swathe of whiteness cut across the sea where the corvette had been. The sea was empty. The searchlight moved from side to side; then reluctantly, as if unwilling to believe what it saw, it came to rest on a falling mushroom of dust, a brownish haze of burnt air and falling fragments, all that remained of what had once been a corvette.

Jardine's escort was small. The loss of even a single warship meant a serious weakening of his defences. But the sinking of the corvette was not the most crippling blow he had to face that night.

For from their battle with the U-boats two of his Swordfish failed to return.

One mistimed her take-off. She staggered with agonizing slowness off the end of the flight deck, then fell stalling on to the crest of a wave. The instant she touched the water she cartwheeled on to her back and sank. The other Swordfish was shot down by a U-boat's ack-ack. Neither crew was saved.

At the start of the convoy there had been fifteen Swordfish in *Viper*'s hangar. Now there were only eleven. Jardine realized that his anti-submarine defences were being whittled gradually away.

And a little before dawn, in the moment of victory, *Viper* suffered yet another loss. A Swordfish crashed on landing.

It was what young Jardine had been dreading for the last four hours. So far plane after plane had thudded safely down (in close on fifty landings the only mishaps had been a single broken oleo leg, and one plane rolling gently into the barrier). But it was too much to expect that the miracle should be self-perpetuating, that each safe touch-down should be followed by another; and early in the fifth hour a plane went over the side.

Was it, young Jardine later asked himself, the approach of dawn, the almost imperceptible lightening of the sky, that made him unconsciously relax? Did his concentration falter because he knew the patrols were being recalled and his ordeal was drawing to an end? Was it a "pilot's error"—those words so easy to write afterwards on the accident report sheet? Or was the error his? It was something he could never be sure of: a doubt that would never be wholly dispelled.

The Swordfish came in to land at a moment when the wind seemed to have steadied. She made a long, straight, perfectly normal approach, a better approach than many of the other planes had managed. But as she hung poised for landing, *Viper* pitched suddenly forward. Her stern was flung violently up. Before he could wave the Swordfish away, the round-down smashed into her; her under-carriage was snapped off, and with a shriek of lacerated metal she slewed screaming across the deck. Her hook missed the arrestor wires by only a couple of inches—but the inches might as well have been miles. For with a splintering crash the plane fell into the catwalk, tore through carley-floats, bofors and oerlikons, hung

for a moment suspended by the folds of a grappling net, then toppled broken-backed into the sea.

Young Jardine covered his eyes. His bats fell to the deck. He took one step across his batting platform; then the whole carrier began to undulate, like water flowing over a scenic railway. His knees buckled, and he crashed unconscious to the deck.

"Emergency! Emergency!" blared the tannoy. "Aircraft over the starboard side."

There was a rush of feet across the flight deck. Carley floats and lifebelts were flung into the sea. Men crowded the rails. But in the half-darkness they could see only a formless shadow, as slowly the broken plane drifted past *Viper's* stern. Of the crew there was no sign.

A searchlight flickered over the wreckage. Instantly Captain Jardine's voice came clearly over the tannoy.

"Put out that light."

The beam faded. A rating swore softly. And into the darkness the wreckage drifted away.

The Flight Deck Officer picked young Jardine up. He pushed the lip of a brandy flask into his mouth. Most of the liquid ran perversely over Jardine's teeth and trickled down his neck, but a little found its way into his throat. He spluttered and sat up. He looked around him, shivered once and then lay still.

"Hey, Bats!" The Flight Deck Officer was alarmed. "Are you O.K.?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I feel absolutely wonderful."

He stood up, picked his bats off the deck and climbed uncertainly on to the batting platform. The Flight Deck Officer clambered up beside him.

"Sit down," he said. "You don't look so good."

Slowly Jardine turned round. His face was grey; his skin was stretched taut; his forehead was beaded with sweat.

"Leave me alone," he whispered.

As the Flight Deck Officer stood awkwardly, uncertain what to do, a messenger came hurrying down the deck. He handed young Jardine a signal pad.

"Message from the Cap'n, sir," he said.

Jardine pushed the signal away.

"I know," he said, "he doesn't have to tell me what to do. Signal the next plane in."

That, he thought, was supposed to be the answer, wasn't it?

You fell off your fairy-cycle; your father told you to pick yourself up and try again. You crashed your motor-bike; your father told you to go straight off on another. It had something to do, your father said, with not losing your nerve.

The next Swordfish, as though in answer to his prayer, made an almost perfect landing. His trembling became less violent. Somewhere, deep within him, his confidence was gradually reborn. He landed two more aircraft safely. He began to think perhaps that after all the crash had been unavoidable: hadn't been his fault.

Soon, as the U-boats dropped farther astern, more and more Swordfish were recalled, and the intervals between the landings increased. At last only two planes were left in the air, and neither was due back for over an hour.

Young Jardine realized then that he could leave his batting platform.

Quite suddenly, relief that his ordeal was over submerged every other feeling. The tension of the last six hours ebbed out of him. He sat down on the edge of his platform. The M.O. had been watching him carefully for the last couple of hours. Now he came hurrying across the deck. But before he reached him, young Jardine was asleep.

A little before dawn the convoy altered course, back to the northward. The U-boats had dropped well astern; they made little effort to follow. Battered and hunted to exhaustion, they had had enough.

After the turmoil of the last few hours the carrier seemed to Captain Jardine strangely silent, as she headed northward beneath a slowly paling sky. Gone was the hissing groan of the barrier as the hydraulics raised and lowered it, in time with the take-off and landing of the planes. Gone too was the grate and sigh of the lift as it rose and fell between flight deck and hangar. The planes were below; the crews were asleep. By dawn the only sounds on the flight deck were the dull roar of the wind, and the shuddering thud of *Viper's* hull as she rose and fell among the wide-spaced waves.

But the carrier remained at action stations; and Captain Jardine remained on the bridge. He stayed there hour after hour, leaning against the starboard bridge rail. His thoughts were not of the past but of the future. He allowed himself no post-mortems on their engagement with the U-boats; that was over and done with; they had won through; "Let the dead Past bury its dead." His con-

cern was with the future. Now it was light, his binoculars swept the line of the eastern horizon, where a bare mile from the carrier the torn ribbons of cloud merged into a wind-whipped sea. He tilted his binoculars up; they swept the sky, the innocent, treacherous sky. He wondered for how long it would be empty; how long it would be before the bombers found them.

CHAPTER SIX

ALL morning the convoy headed north under a ragged sky. By noon the wind was a full gale; the waves, three-quarters of a mile apart, were flooding out of the west like snow-plumed mountains; and the ships were trembling: scraps of paper caught in a wind-scoured tunnel.

And still no bombers came. Another couple of hours, thought Jardine, and the light will begin to fade. He wondered what was holding them back: perhaps the weather? He looked at the driving curtains of snow, then at the met. report that Ian MacLeod had brought him at noon. He could not remember having ever seen a more depressing forecast. He held it up to the light of a bridge lamp.

An intense depression, he read, centred off the tip of Greenland is moving rapidly east. Very strong westerly gale will continue throughout the day, with low cloud and intermittent snow. Wind increasing and backing slowly in the evening.

Grade "C" forecast till 2200/8:

WIND	W.-N.W'ly 50 knots, gusting to 70 knots: increasing.
WEATHER	Cloudy with intermittent blizzards of snow.
CLOUD	9/10-10/10 at 1000 feet, with patches at sea level.
VISIBILITY	1½-2 miles: decreasing.
SEA	Very rough.
OUTLOOK FOR TONIGHT	W'ly gale persisting, backing and increasing.

He knew MacLeod, the Meteorological Officer, well; knew him for an exact, level-headed man, not given to over-statement. He called him up and told him he was coming below to see the weather chart.

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The Meteorological Office was an almost perfect cube; eight feet long, wide and high. Along one wall lay the black bulk of the teleprinter, into which weather reports from every available source were fed by radio and coded into teleprinted sheets. On the opposite wall hung a large-scale weather chart of the north-eastern Atlantic; on it Jardine could see, even from the doorway, the isobaric circles of the vast depression.

It was, MacLeod explained, a storm-centre of staggering intensity. It had built up slowly, off the southern tip of Greenland. Then about twelve hours ago it had started to move eastward, gathering up and engulfing into its vast structure a scattering of minor depressions that lay in its path. Now at its centre the barometer was down to 27.78"; the wind had risen to a hundred and twenty miles an hour; and the whole mass, whirling like an unstable top, was reeling with gathering momentum across the convoy's path.

Jardine looked at MacLeod.

"What," he asked, "would happen to a ship in the middle of that?"

The Met. Officer shook his head.

"That," he said, "Aa wouldna like tae say."

An alarm klaxon sounded on the bridge, and there came faintly and from very far away the muffled thud of gunfire. Jardine flung himself out of the room.

"Send me a wind report," he shouted, as he scrambled up the companionway. "Every half-hour."

On deck the gale seemed to have increased in the few minutes he had been below. The snow had stopped now, and the cloud had risen a little, but the wind was thundering out of the west with mounting fury; it brought tears to his eyes and tore the breath from his mouth. He heard again the distant roll of gunfire and saw, fine on their starboard bow, torn ribbons of ack-ack streaming above a destroyer of the advanced screen. And at the same time he spotted the plane—a solitary Junkers 88—low on the northern horizon.

Two fighter pilots, bowed low against the wind, were stumbling across the flight deck, making for the Wildcats lashed down on the carrier's stern. Jardine's first impulse was to let them take off. Then he stopped to think. Why, he asked himself, had there been only the single Junkers; and why had it fled so precipitately, with barely the pretence of an attack? He delayed his order for the fighters to leave the deck.

Twice again within the next few minutes a single Junkers approached the convoy; and twice again it veered sharply away at the first burst of gunfire. Jardine felt certain then that the attacks were feints, attempts to draw his fighters into the air, away from the convoy.

He kept the Wildcats on deck. The minutes passed.

After a while the bridge telephone tinkled, and a message came through from Stone. "Radar contact. Twenty to twenty-five aircraft. Sea level. Bearing 095°. Range 15 miles." It was the message he had been waiting for since dawn; the intimation that the second attack on his convoy was under way.

Twelve hours earlier a dozen Swordfish had stood between the convoy and the U-boats. Against this new attack from the air Jardine's defences were even more tenuous: seven Wildcat fighters, and the ack-ack guns of his warships and merchantmen. We'll be lucky, he thought, if we get through this with the loss of only one corvette.

He swung *Viper* into wind, and the first two Wildcats took off; they circled the convoy, gaining height, then headed east to intercept the approaching planes. Before they were out of sight the bridge telephone rang again. It was Stone with another radar report: from the opposite side of the convoy a second formation of aircraft was closing in. Another pair of Wildcats had just been brought on deck, and soon they too were airborne and climbing away from the convoy. And before the last three fighters could be wheeled on to the lift the telephone rang for the third time. The First Lieutenant's hand was trembling as he passed Jardine yet another radar report: "Twenty-five to thirty aircraft. Sea level. Dead ahead. Range thirty miles."

The convoy was surrounded; from three directions some seventy aircraft were closing in.

The last of *Viper*'s Wildcats tore hurtling down the flight deck. All seven planes were airborne now. The fate of the convoy was in their hands.

Gordon Blake, the pilot of the first Wildcat to take off, was a New Zealander, a sheep farmer from Waimate on the fringe of the Canterbury Plain. He was a thick-set, deliberate man; one of the oldest of *Viper*'s aircrew, and one of the most popular. He had been in the squadron for eighteen months now—a long time in days when the average life of an operational pilot was slightly under a year—yet he had never shot down a plane. He was too

imperturbable to lose much sleep over this. Outwardly he treated his ill-luck as a joke; yet at heart he longed for the day when his guns would send a Heinkel or Junkers blazing into the sea. And this was not because of hatred or vanity or pride, but because he knew that he was already overdue for a shore appointment, and he wanted, before he left operational flying, to feel he had repaid in full the time and trouble and several thousand pounds spent on his training. "I could never face my sheep again," he once said to the C.O., "if I don't get a single Jerry. 'Brother,' they'll say to me, 'you might as well have stayed at home!'"

Adjusting his oxygen mask, he thought that this, surely, would be his lucky day. He glanced behind him and saw, tucked close behind his starboard wing, young Milton—the most junior of *Viper's* fighter pilots. (The Wildcats always operated in pairs.) Blake motioned him further away; in the buffeting, uncertain wind there was no point in their aircraft keeping too close.

They levelled off at twelve hundred feet, just below cloud; then headed for the nearest group of planes. After a couple of minutes the Fighter Direction Officer called them up.

"Hello Jaybirds Two and Three. Bandits twelve o'clock. Sea level. Range five miles."

They saw them almost at once. A single formation of Junkers 88, skimming the waves in loose echelon port.

They had rehearsed mock attacks so often that no signal was needed.

Milton peeled off. He eased the Wildcat into a thirty degree dive. Rapidly his speed built up: 260 knots, 280, 300, 320. A mile ahead of the Junkers he levelled off, close to the waves; then he headed straight for a plane in the centre of the formation. At a combined speed of six hundred miles an hour the aircraft hurtled together; head on. Gunfire from a dozen Junkers spat at the Wildcat, churning up and ricochetting off the sea; but Milton held his fire. A collision seemed inevitable. But at the last second the plane he was heading for began to wobble. Her pilot's nerve broke; he jerked back on his stick, and the Junkers rose sharply. Milton's gun-sight filled with the black underbelly of the plane. His finger tightened on to the firing button; tracer and cannon-shell ripped into the Junkers, tearing into her most vulnerable parts. At first she seemed quite unaffected. For three-quarters of a mile she rose in a steady, even climb. Then a small tongue of flame began to lick at her starboard wing-root. Suddenly, with a staccato cough,

her fuel-tanks exploded, her wings broke off at the root, and through a haze of acrid smoke she spun screaming into the sea.

As Milton passed through the centre of the Junkers, Blake fell on to them from above and astern. Fire from their turrets came stabbing up at him, like lightning striking at an anvil; but he concentrated his attention on a single plane. At first the Junkers he headed for kept doggedly on course; then as the range closed, and his cannon-shell smacked into the bomber's wing, the German pilot swung aside. He almost collided with the plane beside him. Instantly the centre of the formation became broken up, with planes banking and wheeling away, as the Wildcat—guns yammering—flashed through the centre of them.

And before they could re-form Milton was diving on to them again, raking the sea ahead into a flurry of foam, forcing them to turn aside, away from the convoy, back towards the Norwegian coast. The formation broke up.

If they had kept together they would have had the safety of numbers. They would have suffered losses—two, maybe three would have been shot down; but by sheer weight they could have brushed the fighters aside and gone on to make a co-ordinated attack on the convoy. But they didn't keep together. They scattered. And individually they were vulnerable; vulnerable not only to the fighters, but to the ack-ack guns of the convoy. A few planes tried to re-form. But Blake dived on to them. Singling out their leader he prised him out of the formation and drove him into cloud, smoke pouring from his starboard engine. Leaderless, the Junkers again scattered.

So it was that the warships guarding the convoy had to face not a massed co-ordinated attack, but a succession of individual planes, each of which ran in turn into a curtain of heavy fire.

Blake and Milton harassed them as far as the fringe of the convoy, then, as the sky ahead darkened with bursting shrapnel, they wheeled aside.

And the German pilots found the fire of the warships as fierce and accurate as the fire of the fighters.

They hadn't expected as warm a reception as this. A few had already jettisoned their bombs, escaping the Wildcats; these slunk away. A few made half-hearted attacks, more intent on avoiding the gunfire than bombing accurately; their bombs fell wide. But most of the planes went in bravely; bravely but singly; and many of them were shot down.

Within twenty minutes of the Wildcats taking off the first group of aircraft had been beaten off; their losses, four planes shot down by gunfire and three by fighters. Their only success a number of near misses on a corvette, and a bomb which failed to explode lodged beside the funnel of a merchantman.

Blake and Milton didn't pursue the Junkers—for Milton's plane had been damaged. Instead they stayed close to the convoy. And it was as well they did. For the last of the bombers had barely disappeared into cloud, when a thudding of gunfire from the convoy's bow warned them that the second wave of attackers had arrived.

And this second attack was a very different affair from the first.

Blake saw the Junkers while they were still some miles from the convoy; a group of twelve planes in tight formation, coming in diagonally between the advanced screen and the forward vessels of the convoy itself. His first impulse was to drop on them at once; to join the pair of Wildcats already darting round them. But fighter pilots sometimes have a sixth sense; a fey awareness; a shadow of premonition. Blake had this feeling now. Strongly. More strongly than he had ever had it before. He felt the hair stiffening on the nape of his neck. He kept looking into his rear-vision mirror, expecting to see a Junkers on his tail. He stared again at the formation below. There were only ten of them now. The fighters had wheeled away; and every bofors and oerlikon in the convoy seemed to be hammering into them. He saw two more planes, like blazing torches, fall into the sea. But the remainder closed up and kept steadily on course. He realized suddenly that they weren't heading directly for the convoy; they were flying across its bow; drawing its fire. Again a shadow of premonition pricked up the hair on his neck.

The voice of the F.D.O., high-pitched and urgent, almost split his earphones.

"Jaybirds Two and Three. To starboard. To starboard. Bandits approaching the stern of convoy. Sea level."

The Wildcats flicked over into a half-roll. Their superchargers rose to a high-pitched scream as in a 400-knot dive they came flashing low over the rear ships of the convoy.

They were only just in time.

Blake was still turning his gun-button to "fire," when a dozen Junkers burst out of a low belt of cloud and fell on to the hindmost ships. They had come in at sea level: too low for *Viper*'s

radar to give more than a few seconds' warning. If the Wildcats hadn't been half-way to meet them the surprise would have been complete. As it was, Blake and Milton met them head on, half-way between cloud and convoy; and the sudden clatter of gunfire from a new quarter gave the ack-ack crews a dozen precious seconds to re-align their sights.

Blake realized how much was at stake; realized what he had to do. He headed straight for the centre of the German planes.

He ran into heavy fire. Tracer from half-a-dozen forward firing guns converged on to his plane. A spate of bullets tore through his starboard wing. Another burst smacked heavily into his engine. Dark-red banners of flame began to stream out of the cowling; a jet of oil sprayed thickly across his windscreen. But he held the plane on course. His finger clamped on to the firing-button.

Oil, dark and viscous, flooded across his windscreen. He was almost on top of the Junkers, when he felt the control-column judder. He moved it forward. Nothing happened. His ailerons had been shot clean away. Blinded and out of control, he slumped forward as the Wildcat scythed through the centre of the German planes. Two Junkers pilots straight in his path flung their aircraft aside. One touched wingtips with his neighbour. Instantly the two planes swung together. Clawing at each other like falling eagles, they spiralled seaward. Their bombs exploded; and they vanished in a haze of thin, acrid smoke.

Another Junkers, already damaged by Blake's cannon-shell, was flung half on to her back by the blast of the exploding bombs. Before the pilot could right her, the plane toppled into a spin. She was flying too low to have a chance of pulling out.

The Wildcat, blazing fiercely, bored through the last of the Junkers. Flames from her engine trailed like torrents of blood in her wake. But Blake never felt the tongues of heat that cut like acetylene torches through the hood of his cockpit. For a burst of tracer had hit him, squarely and mercifully, across the heart.

The centre of the attacking force was broken. The arrow, its point blunted, momentarily lost way. Then the remaining Junkers began to close up. They had been slowed down, but they hadn't been halted. Once they had got their bearings, they again came sweeping on to the convoy.

Young Milton accounted for one more. Another disintegrated under the hail of gunfire that came flashing up from the warships of the screen. Half the attacking planes were down now; but the

other half got through. Skimming the waves, weaving through the flak, they came screaming into the centre of the convoy.

Their target was the *Viper*.

One, banking to avoid a burst of tracer, feathered a wave with her wingtip. Instantly and without a sound, she flicked on to her back and plunged to the bottom of the sea.

Another, half-blinded by the streams of gunsmoke that drifted above the ships, mistook the *Atalanta* for the *Viper*. Her pilot went off at a tangent. The cruiser came swaying into his sights. At the last second he realized his mistake; but the *Atalanta* was a tempting target; his finger stabbed his release button. Four bombs fell seaward. Four pyramids of water welled up across the *Atalanta*'s wake, the nearest less than a dozen yards from her stern. She was flung violently forward. Her bows bit deep into an oncoming wave; and a thousand tons of ice-green sea swept foaming across her fore-deck. Guns were torn off their mountings, lifelines snapped like rotted twine, and twenty men, the life beaten out of them, were sponged off the cruiser's deck. Her screws were flung high out of water. She shuddered violently in a terrible, vibrating spasm. Then, shaking the water off her decks, she rose slowly out of the sea and settled reluctantly on to an even keel. But her propeller shaft had been twisted and strained; almost at once her speed began to drop.

From *Viper*'s bridge Jardine saw the last four planes come sweeping towards the carrier. They came in very low, almost brushing the sea, and very fast. One, hit by oerlikon fire, was forced away, trailing smoke. But the others got through. Their bomb-doors opened. A dozen 500-lb bombs patterned the carrier.

Viper disappeared.

Around her the sea heaved skyward. On every side great pyramids of foam leapt high above her flight deck. Sheets of driven spray swept her decks; bomb splinters knifed into her hull. But by a miracle she wasn't directly hit. She jerked and quivered, vibrated and shuddered, as the force of the explosions lifted her half out of the water. She reeled sickeningly into the vast craters bitten out of the sea—Jardine thought for one terrible moment she would roll completely over—but at last, as the bomb-splashes subsided, she emerged into clear water. Then, like the *Atalanta*, she settled slowly on to an even keel.

All over the ship men picked themselves dazedly up. And the first thing they noticed was the silence.

Gone suddenly was the scream of planes; gone the clatter of machine-guns, and the bark of bofors and oerlikons. The sky was clear. As suddenly as they had come, the Junkers had disappeared.

In the sudden quiet Jardine heard all the small, familiar sounds of his ship: the wind whining through the radar screen, the hum of the air-conditioning plant, the creak of ice caught up by the slackened arrestor wires, the hiss of the bow wave foaming along the keel. They were very dear to him. Then, rising above these, he became conscious of another not-so-welcome sound; the dull roar of the still-increasing gale.

He sent a signal to every ship in the convoy: "What damage? What claims?"

It was some time before all the replies came through. But the first few signals he received had a heartening similarity, and they set the pattern for those that followed. When all the replies had come in Jardine found that the balance was better by far than he had dared to hope. German losses had been heavy; twelve Junkers destroyed and eleven damaged: a third of the attacking force put out of action. His own losses had been amazingly light. One Wildcat had been lost, and one damaged. Of his merchantmen only one had been hit—and that by a bomb which had failed to explode. Of his warships, *Viper*, *Atlanta* and a corvette had suffered near misses, and a destroyer had been hit flush on her for'ard turret. But warships are built for punishment; the damage in each case was repairable and within a couple of hours the ships were back to near-maximum efficiency.

For most people the battle ended with the disappearance of the last of the Junkers (this was an hour before sunset). But *Viper*'s Wildcats were still in the air; and for the fighter pilots and for the batsman the real battle was still to come.

After landing the last of the Wildcats, young Jardine had been carried below by the doctor. He was so deeply asleep that even when the carrier rolled sharply and the doctor lost his footing and half fell against a bulkhead, he never opened his eyes. The doctor took him to his own cabin. He laid him on the bunk, pulled off his boots, loosened his clothes and covered him with blankets. He would have liked to give him an injection—to put him under for twenty-four hours—but he knew that young Jardine would soon be needed again for the job that only he could do. He sat down beside him and took his pulse. It was a hundred and twenty.

The doctor stayed in the cabin for a couple of hours; but young Jardine didn't wake; not even when *Viper* reeled and juddered under the hail of bombs. Several times he moved uneasily in his sleep; once his face puckered up, his tongue ran from side to side across his mouth, and his lips began to move. The doctor bent over him. At first the mumbled words were meaningless; then suddenly he got the gist of them. He straightened up: surprised.

It was a few minutes after this that a steward knocked on the cabin door. He brought a message from the Captain: would the S.M.O. report to his sea-cabin right away.

Jardine's sea-cabin was small and austere furnished: two chairs, a bunk, a fitted cupboard, a steel safe. Jardine was sitting in one chair; he motioned the doctor to the other.

"You've been with my son?"

"Yes, sir. I have."

"How is he?"

"All right at the moment. He's asleep."

Jardine nodded as if reassured.

"I want you," he said, "to keep an eye on him."

The doctor studied his finger-tips. It was some time before he replied. Then he said slowly:

"I'll do what I can, sir. But what he really needs is sleep."

Jardine got up and began to pace the cabin.

"He'll have," he said, "to do without sleep. As long as the convoy needs planes, he'll have to keep going."

"If you drive him too hard, he'll crack up."

There was an awkward silence. At last Jardine said:

"I don't enjoy doing this. He is my son, you know."

"And if I'm to keep an eye on him he's my patient. I'm telling you, sir, as a doctor. Take some of the strain off him, or he'll crack."

For a long time Jardine was silent, then he said:

"I'll do anything you say—short of stopping flying."

"Thank you, sir." The doctor leaned forward. "Then what I'd suggest is this. . . ."

When young Jardine felt the water splashing on to his face, he dreamed, in the second before he woke, that his mother was playing with him in the bath. He was three, and far too young of course to lie on his back by himself; but she had one hand under his head, and the other hand was squeezing a sponge, and the water was

cascading over his tummy, up round his neck and over and across his forehead; and she was laughing. Then the water splashed into his mouth. He woke, and saw the doctor, holding a dripping flannel, standing beside his bunk.

He lay quietly on his back, the happiness of his dream ebbing away like a rip-tide laying bare the mud flats of an estuary. There's no holding the tide, he thought. The past is another world; another and better world. He sat up.

"What is it?" he said. "More planes?"

"There will be soon. But you've some time yet: a good half-hour."

"This isn't my cabin."

"No. It's mine."

"What happened?"

"You fell asleep. It was partly exhaustion; partly lack of food. You've not had a proper meal for days. My steward's bringing one in a minute."

The meal, when it arrived, consisted of a bowl of steaming soup and a plate of ham, egg and chips. Jardine took a spoonful of the soup. He laid the spoon down and looked at the doctor.

"It tastes funny," he said.

"Funny? How."

Jardine tasted it again.

"Sort of dusty. You try."

The doctor sipped at a spoonful.

"Seems all right," he said, "to me."

Jardine had been watching him carefully. He got off the bed, picked up the bowl and emptied it into the wash-basin.

"You've been talking to my father," he said.

"That was rather a waste, wasn't it?"

"You've been talking to my father. He asked you to see I didn't crack up. So you thought you'd drug the soup."

"There was a mild sedative in the soup. Nothing more. If I'd wanted to drug you, I'd have given you an injection while you were asleep."

Jardine looked at the plate of food.

"I suppose," he said, "you've doped the ham and eggs as well?"

The doctor sighed.

"Listen, Bats," he said. "You don't have to try to be tough. You've got a vital, terribly exacting job. Naturally, people want to help. If they try to give you a hand, don't slap them in the face."

Young Jardine's anger died.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I know I'm being difficult."

He sat down and started to eat his ham and eggs.

"It's just," he said, "that I can't stand being watched."

"Being watched?"

"Being watched by Father. For twenty years I've felt him 'keep-an eye on me'. I know what he's afraid of. I know he thinks I'm a coward."

Fear and love, the doctor thought; like the ivy and the honeysuckle, they choke each other to death.

"You're wrong," he said. "When you talk like that I almost wish I had given you a sedative."

Young Jardine stood up.

"Later." He tensed his legs against the swaying of the ship. "The storm's getting worse," he said. "Soon there'll be no flying. No landing-on. Then you can give me all the sedatives you like."

His three hours' sleep had done him good. He felt almost refreshed as he clambered up to the crewroom to collect his bats. He heard the trumpet of the tannoy, "Stand by to land-on two Wildcats"; he felt *Viper* heel over as she swung into wind; he quickened his step.

Except for Marsden the crewroom was empty.

"Ah, Bats!" Marsden seemed glad to see him. "I've got three messages for you."

"Before I land the Wildcats?"

"Yes. Your father thought you ought to see the latest wind report."

He handed Jardine a printed slip: *Wind west-north-westerly* (it read), *50-55 knots. Gusts of 65-75 knots. Backing and increasing slowly. Frequent squalls of snow.*

Young Jardine handed it back.

"Very encouraging," he said.

"The other messages are more cheerful. Your father says you can take your time with the landing-on. He's turned the whole convoy into wind. He doesn't mind how long the landings take."

"Now that," said young Jardine, "really is a help."

"The last message is a bit personal. I know these things aren't usually talked about, but I think you're being recommended for a gong."

"A gong? Whatever for?"

"For your batting, of course."

"Good God! What a crazy idea! Whatever will Father say?"

"As a matter of fact," said Marsden, "it was his idea."

Walking down the flight deck young Jardine looked about him. No prospect could have been more desolate: grey sea, grey sky and a frenetic wind. But happiness, he thought, isn't a matter of where you are. He had never been happier than now. The fact that he'd been recommended for decoration—probably the M.B.E., Marsden had said—meant very little; it was the fact that his father had done the recommending that pleased him beyond words. He can't, he thought, think so badly of me after all.

He wasn't foolishly optimistic about what lay ahead—a glance at *Viper's* round-down rising and falling among the waves dispelled any idea that his job would be easy—but he felt within himself the glow of a new-found confidence. His father had faith in him. He had something to live up to now. In the morning he had landed fifty planes; surely in the afternoon he could manage six.

He clambered on to the batting platform, nodded at the Flight Deck Officer, and the first of the Wildcats was signalled in.

But the storm had worsened since the morning; and Wildcats were never as easy to land as Swordfish. The first plane Jardine had to wave off seven times. Seven times it came curving in. Seven times, as it hung poised to land, the carrier corkscrewed away. And seven times, as Jardine waved it off, it quivered away from the batting platform, its undercarriage almost feathering the deck. The eighth approach was a ragged, untidy affair—Jardine realized the pilot must be desperately tired—but at the last moment the plane steadied-up; and, as it neared the round-down, the flight deck rose obligingly. Jardine gave the signal to cut; and the plane thudded down, heavily but safely, on the last arrestor wire. Her hook caught at once, and she was jerked to a stop.

Two dozen of the flight-deck handling party came swarming out of the catwalk. They seized hold of the plane, manhandled it for'ard, and lashed it down in front of the barrier, so that the deck was clear for another plane to begin its approach.

The next five landings, which would normally have taken perhaps ten minutes, went on for over an hour. Time and again one of the Wildcats would make a perfect approach, only for the carrier to corkscrew away at the last moment, leaving the plane half-stalling fifty feet above the deck. Those were the worst moments of all: the moments of terrible uncertainty when Jardine

had to send a plane round again, and the engine would burst into screaming protest, and the plane would rise with uncertain and agonizing slowness away from the steeply pitching deck.

Once, as Jardine gave the signal to cut, *Viper*'s stern rose with extra violence; the landing-wheels of the approaching fighter thudded on to the edge of the round-down; the plane bounced thirty feet into the air. For a second it hung poised over the barrier—nothing it seemed could prevent it crashing into the parked aircraft—then the pilot rammed open his throttle. Slowly, uncertainly, the Wildcat picked up speed; but not enough speed. It lost height, it sank quivering over the carrier's bows and disappeared into the trough of an enormous wave. It seemed as though it could never rise again; but as *Viper* breasted the next swell, the men who had rushed to the rails saw it was still airborne, its flaps almost brushing the sea. And at last, very slowly, it began to climb to safety. It circled the carrier and started its next approach.

At the end of half an hour two Wildcats were safely down. At the end of an hour, four; and a few minutes before sunset the miracle was repeated for the sixth and final time as the last of the fighters thudded safely on to the flight deck.

Behind the stormclouds, the sun sank into an angry sea. Soon it was night.

By three o'clock it was utterly dark. At least, Captain Jardine thought, one danger has passed: there'll be no more attacks from the air; the weather is too bad. He returned *Viper* to normal routine.

In theory the danger from U-boats still remained; but as he looked at the tempestuous sea, Jardine doubted if any submarine could launch an attack in conditions such as these. (The wind was now a steady sixty knots, increasing fast; and as the storm centre approached, the wave-crests drew farther apart, and heightened.) He decided the weather was too bad to keep his anti-submarine patrols in the air; when the Swordfish now circling the convoy had finished her patrol, he'd cancel flying.

But half an hour before the plane was due to return she called the carrier up. She reported a U-boat contact fine on their starboard bow. Should she, she asked, investigate?

No message could have been more unwelcome. Quickly Jardine called for detailed weather reports and for the exact range and bearing of the U-boat. Then he paced the bridge, alone, wondering

if the chance of sinking the U-boat was worth the risk of losing the plane. (And the risk was a very real one; for the submarine had surfaced dead down-wind, and the wind was increasing fast; if the Swordfish went after her and got too far to leeward, she might never return.) He decided to take the risk—hadn't Churchill said that the sinking of a U-boat had an equal effect on the course of the war to a thousand-bomber raid on Berlin; and the thousand-bomber raid wasn't made without risk.

What happened in the next hour was to haunt Jardine for the rest of his life.

With the gale behind her it took the Swordfish only a few minutes to home on to the U-boat. Jim Heywood, the pilot, had hoped his attack would succeed by surprise; for in the worsening storm the U-boat captain would hardly expect a plane to be airborne. But his hopes weren't fulfilled. At the last moment the U-boat dived; and by the time Heywood's starshell illuminated the sea she had disappeared. For a couple of minutes he tried to circle the spot where she had vanished, hoping she would surface; but his plane was like driftwood, caught in the flood of a swollen river. He felt himself being driven off course battered eastward by hammer-blows of wind. He decided to give up. He turned the plane westward, and headed back for the convoy. But after a quarter of an hour they seemed no nearer; indeed his observer's A.S.V.X. screen indicated that if anything they were losing ground: the speed of the wind was greater than the speed of the plane, and they were being forced backward, away from the carrier, out into the empty sea.

There is a saying that God helps those who help themselves. It isn't true. If ever a man fought for his life—fought with courage and skill—it was Heywood. He jettisoned his depth-charges; he threw out his ballast—he pushed home his over-ride and increased speed to 100 knots. He went down to sea-level, hoping the wind there would be less. And for a little while it seemed that his struggle would not be in vain. For very slowly the plane began to close with the convoy.

In the Operations Room Stone watched Heywood's progress on his radar screen; watched the shadow of the plane as almost imperceptibly it inched closer to the convoy. At last it was very near; less than five miles from *Viper*'s beam. For half an hour it clung there motionless, clawing its way head-on into the insensate gale. Then, as the wind increased, it began very slowly to fall back.

On his screen Stone watched the shadow grow gradually smaller, gradually more indistinct; until at last it faded utterly away. What a terrible way, he thought, to die.

That evening Jardine divided his time between the bridge and the radar screen. He looked at the shadow of the Swordfish several times; but he only mentioned it once—quite early on—to ask if the Swordfish had enough petrol to get her to Norway.

"A pity," he said, when Stone told him she hadn't.

The Air Operations Officer, and several others, thought him callous; thought him cold and unfeeling. Just what they expected him to do, they couldn't have said themselves. Perhaps they would have been mollified by a display of public grief. Perhaps they thought he ought to have behaved like the hero of a melodramatic film; to have gone about with tight lips and haunted eyes. But Jardine failed to oblige them. He made no apologies. No excuses. He had, to all outward appearances, no regrets. He simply carried on with his job.

As soon as the Swordfish had vanished from the screen he went back to the bridge. He stayed there a long time, watching the warning signals of the approaching storm: the shriller screaming of a wind that backed gradually from north to west; the more violent swinging of the pendulum that measured *Viper*'s pitch and roll; and the increased distortion of radar screens, now darkened out by the great sheets of water torn in continual cataracts from the crest of every wave. And as the storm-drenched hours passed slowly by, he found that his mind started to wander away from the present—over which he had no control—and his thoughts, following an all-too-familiar pattern, turned to the past, and he began to think of all the pilots and observers for whose death he had been responsible.

There were, he reminded himself, a great number of them; far too great a number for him ever to sleep happily again. There had been a time when he could remember all their names; but lately his memory had begun to fail him; and this, quite illogically, distressed him. But their faces he still recalled with clarity. They welled up now, one after another, out of the midnight sea: Dewhurst with his pint tankard of beer; Hunt with his eternal pipe; Maitland with the photographs of his wife and children. They were the substance of his secret thoughts, the men who walked the sequence of his dreams, the ghosts he could never lay.

Viper, nearing the storm centre, moved uneasily under his feet.

He made an effort to throw off his depression. Why, he asked himself, think of the past? They had been brave men. Now they were dead. If he wept till the oceans overflowed he couldn't bring them back to life. His job was with the future; the future of his convoy.

His heart warmed at the thought of his convoy. Already they had been through much together. They had been battered by U-boats and planes; they were about to be battered by the approaching storm. But they were coming through. And not a single merchantman had been lost. Nor, he thought, will they be lost. Though I lose everything else, I'll not lose them.

He felt a gentle, persistent pulling at his arm, and looking round saw Ian MacLeod. He took the midnight met. report, and saw that the storm centre was now only fifty miles ahead, and that at its vortex the wind was estimated at 130 miles an hour.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AFTER he had landed the last of the Wildcats young Jardine went below. He took his sedatives willingly, almost gratefully, like a man who welcomes oblivion. For now he could sleep, sleep deeply, knowing that for many hours no hand would come plucking at his shoulder, no voice would be telling him to get up and land the planes. He climbed into his bunk; his eyes were shut before his head had touched his pillow.

When he woke he felt relaxed and at ease. Lying in a contented haze, on the borderline of wakefulness, he looked lazily at his watch. The hands pointed to close on ten o'clock—he supposed in the morning. So he had slept for seventeen hours; no wonder he felt a stir of hunger. He rolled out of his bunk; the deck fell away from him and he was thrown violently to the floor. Picking himself up, he realized that *Viper* was reeling and corkscrewing with a frightening malevolence. So they were near the vortex of the storm.

It took him half an hour to dress, and by the time he staggered across to the wardroom, breakfast was being cleared away. The meal was cold (for there was no heat in the galley) and rather like an obstacle race; a pursuit of bread and butter and marmalade across a wildly tilting table. Sometimes *Viper* rolled so violently that the plates jumped over the fiddles—the partition-boards designed to keep the food in place.

From the way the ship was behaving young Jardine had some idea of what it would be like on deck; but he was unprepared for the tumult that flung itself on to him, as an hour later he clambered into the catwalk. He stood appalled, clinging in disbelief to the stanchions of a companionway—to have ventured on to the flight deck itself would have been suicide. What frightened him most was the way the world had shrunk, had shrunk during the night to a tumultuous square mile of wind and sea and sky.

The sea had been tempestuous before. Now it had taken on an elemental fury, an insane malevolence. Huge waves, a mile and a quarter from crest to crest, came thundering in endless succession out of the west. Each as it neared the carrier towered high above her; each, it seemed to Jardine, must engulf her utterly. Yet always *Viper* rose; always she climbed the steeping incline, until the wave-crest trembled beneath her and was passed. Then came the plunge, the sickening, breath-catching plunge, down, everlastingly down, to the pit of the next cavernous trough. Sometimes, as Jardine watched, he saw the whole crest of a wave ripped away by the wind, and flung horizontally across the sea. Those were the worst moments of all; the moments of terror, when ships in the path of the avalanches of water reeled and staggered as thousands of tons of wind-driven sea sluiced through their upper-decks, crushing gun-mountings, tearing off carley-floats, buckling deck-houses and funnels, and sweeping men, before they had time to cry out, into the frenetic sea.

And the sea was not alone in its fury; it had a companion in violence, a partner in destruction: the wind. It came clawing out of the west. It filled Jardine's ears with a continual high-pitched roar. And it, like the sea, could pick up a man; could hurl him across the deck, could smash him lifeless against gun-turret or deckhouse, or sweep him like a splinter of flotsam over the side.

Above them, the sky hung low, a livid dead-white, as though wiped clean of colouring or cloud. It was an evil, unpitying sky, as charged with malice as either wind or sea.

In storms such as this, thought Jardine, ships can founder, can disappear without a trace.

For half an hour he clung to the companionway, sodden, frightened and cold. I'll stay here, he thought, until I stop trembling. I'll not go below, afraid. He forced himself to watch the waves as they flooded in like mountains blotting out the sky, and the gulfs as they opened up beneath like caverns torn out of the sea; until

at last he realized that for some reason beyond his comprehension *Viper* was neither going to turn turtle nor stand on her head; then his fear, very gradually, began to ebb away.

After a while he thought of looking for the rest of the convoy.

He could see them only occasionally: a solitary merchantman poised at some fantastic angle on the slope of a mountainous wave, or a warship riding the horizon on a surge of spume and spray. Their tortured antics were hardly reassuring; but at least it was something to know that other ships in the convoy had survived the night.

The same thought brought a touch of comfort to his father, who had spent the last thirty-six hours wedged into the least wind-swept corner of the bridge. For most people in the carrier the end of flying had meant the end of responsibility; but for Captain Jardine the problems of the night had rivalled those of the day.

At midnight he had ordered the convoy to reduce speed to five and a half knots, just enough to give his vessels leeway and keep them steady on course. Three hours later, when wind and sea were still increasing, he had reduced speed still further, and ordered the convoy into more open formation. He had also told the vessels to show navigation lights—since there was no fear of attack. But not until dawn, when they were nearing the inner core of the depression, did he give the order that every ship had been longing for; then at last he turned into wind, turned the convoy head on to the threatening sea. After that, there was nothing more he could do.

Until that morning his ships had been able to keep some sort of formation. Gone of course were the neat parallel columns that five days before had drawn away from the Shetlands assembly box; but up to now the convoy had always been a manageable whole. But as the depression centre rolled toward them, and wind and sea built up to a climatic fury, the convoy began to break up.

Jardine fought desperately to keep his ships together—for he could look ahead, could visualize the return of better weather and the coming again of planes and U-boats (they would have an easy job if they found the convoy scattered). Besides, he and his vessels had come in the last few days to know and respect each other; they had been proved in the same furnace, hammered into cohesion on the same anvil; each vessel that now dropped out was like a friend departing for a far country—a friend who might never be heard of again.

First to go was one of the smaller merchantmen. She found that even the reduced speed of four knots was more than she could manage. She began to drop astern. Jardine did all he could to keep her with him. He sent her encouraging signals, caustic signals, blasphemous signals. He reduced the whole convoy to two and a half knots—but at this speed *Viper* was sluggish in answering her helm; twice she was thrown broadside on to the mountainous seas, twice she rolled almost to destruction. It wasn't, Jardine knew, worth risking the carrier to save the merchantman. There was only one thing he could do. He ordered the convoy back to four knots. The merchantman fell gradually astern.

Next to drop out was a corvette. She had been damaged in the previous day's attack—the plates in her bow having been strained by a near miss from one of the Junkers. Now, under the pounding of the sea, her rivets began to shake loose; beads of water formed inside her bulkheads; a watertight compartment was flooded, but still the moisture came seeping in. After a hurried exchange of signals, the corvette turned her undamaged bow to the waves and went limping southward. A week later she staggered half-sinking into Rykjavic. The convoy was being whittled away.

At noon they suffered another and far more serious loss. The *San Antonio* signalled *Viper* that her engines were running hot, she suspected a blocked oilpipe. Jardine swore softly. What a time, he thought, for a ship to get her innards choked up! His anxiety was heightened when he remembered that the *San Antonio* was one of the ships carrying the crates of special equipment. But there was no help he could give, no advice he could offer; he simply acknowledged the signal and waited. After half an hour the merchantman signalled again.

"Request permission to stop engines and heave-to for repairs."

So there, thought Jardine, is the end of the *San Antonio*. In a sea like this she'll founder. But he could only trust her Master's judgment; he didn't query his request; and he kept his fears to himself.

"Permission granted," he signalled. "But cool your ardour as soon as possible. Tonight you'll have to sleep alone."

He watched through his glasses as the merchantman lost way; watched as she fell astern, her engines silent. Almost at once she yawed broadside on, and began to roll scuppers under.

Three ships lost, he thought, in as many hours. Soon there'll be no convoy left.

The storm showed no sign of slackening.

After a couple of hours yet another merchantman signalled that she was falling gradually astern. It was then that Jardine decided to split the convoy up; half would heave to, the other half would stay under way.

It was the smaller ships he left behind: four merchantmen, four corvettes and two of his older destroyers. In charge of them he left the *Atalanta*; and the anxiety of parting was lessened by the knowledge that he couldn't be leaving his ship~~s~~ in better hands.

Limping slowly among the white-crested waves the vessels sorted themselves into two groups, one surrounding *Atalanta*, one surrounding *Viper*; the former hove-to, the latter ploughed on.

It was the large vessels that stayed with Jardine; the vessels that needed speed to answer their helm: two cruisers, four destroyers and four of the larger merchantmen. For a couple of hours they laboured on, moving slowly, under a sky that became steadily darker as the storm-centre drew near. And still the wind increased; still the sea rose. This can't, thought Jardine, go on; nothing can stand up to punishment like this; something will have to give.

He was right.

The *Denver Willis* was a nine thousand tonner; the only American-built vessel in the convoy, the only ship whose plates were not riveted but welded. So far she had stood up to the seas well, with little sign of strain; but a hull that is welded is far more vulnerable than one that is riveted, and now, without warning, a complete section of the *Denver Willis*'s bow buckled in.

Half an hour before sunset the Yeoman handed Jardine a signal.

"*Denver Willis* to C. in C. Plates buckling on starboard bow. Am turning stern into sea."

In spite of the risk, Jardine reduced speed. He watched the *Denver Willis*, a clean-lined ship a little astern of *Viper*, back slowly into the vast rollers. For several minutes she seemed to be riding normally. Then the First Lieutenant muttered that she looked a bit low in the head. Jardine nodded. He too had seen that she was down by the bows and listing slightly to starboard.

The Yeoman brought him another signal.

"*Denver Willis* to C. in C. Plates continue to buckle. Have sprung series of uncontrollable leaks."

Jardine knew then that the merchantman was doomed. Courage could not save her; nor seamanship, nor skill. What the sea wants, it takes. But though he knew this, he fought for the *Denver Willis*.

with a reckless disregard of the cost. He risked the convoy to try to save her.

He ordered his ten vessels to heave-to. Signals flashed from ship to ship, and soon a cruiser and a destroyer began to manoeuvre upwind of the listing merchantman. Moving cautiously through the heavy seas, they inched towards her. Soon they were close—dangerously close, for already the *Denver Willis* was out of control, yawing and plunging about in sudden, unpredictable swoops. But close as they were, the warships couldn't get near enough to shoot lifelines from ship to ship. Only one hope remained. They began to jettison oil. Thick viscous streams pulsated out of their pipelines; and almost at once the wave-crests began to flatten. They jettisoned enough oil to have ironed any normal sea to the smoothness of a millpond; but oil was their lifeblood; they could spare only so much; and what they could spare was not enough. The crests of the waves were smoothed out; but the great rollers themselves were unaffected; their angry impact continued; and soon the *Denver Willis* began to settle by the bows.

There are some things that can never be forgotten. As he watched from *Viper*'s bridge, Jardine reminded himself that every day of every year far greater tragedies take place than the loss of a single merchant vessel in a storm. Yet never before had he felt such pity and despair, never such anger and impotence as when that evening in the gathering darkness he saw the *Denver Willis* being bludgeoned to death by the uncaring arctic waves.

She lay in the centre of a storm-lashed circle of ships. All of them watched her; none of them could help her. Her bows dipped lower. Her list increased. It ought, thought Jardine, to be night; this is something that shouldn't be seen. He shut his eyes as she fell on to her side; a great wave rolled towards her; and when he opened his eyes she was gone.

It was quite dark by the time the convoy got under way.

There was one survivor from the *Denver Willis*: an engine-room artificer from Cardiff; and a long time afterwards he told the crew of the destroyer that picked him up something of the miracle of his escape.

He said that when the master of the *Denver Willis* realized the oil was having no effect, and that the sea was too rough for boats to be lowered or lifelines shot aboard, he told his crew their only chance of survival was to lash themselves to a piece of wreckage and jump overboard; there was, he said, a million to one

chance that they would be flung against one of the ships that lay down-wind. This to the artificer seemed good advice. So he lashed himself to a lifebelt; and the lifebelt he lashed to the side of a packing-case. Then with three or four others he was among the first to jump. He jumped at a carefully chosen moment, as the *Denver Willis* was rising on to the crest of a swell. He hit the sea feet first, and at once felt himself glissading downward and forward along the reverse side of the swell. His packing-case acted as a sort of surf-board, and he entered the water surprisingly smoothly. The sea, he said, didn't strike him as being especially rough; but it was cold; so cold that almost at once he lost all feeling in legs and arms. He had the sensation of being carried forward at a great pace by a half-frozen underwater current. He had no control whatsoever over his speed, direction or position in the water; and it was quite by chance that he found himself smashed suddenly against the hull of a ship. And draped against the hull were the rungs and guidelines of a scrambling net. For several seconds he lay spreadeagled against the hull, pinned down by the pressure of the sea. His hands froze on to the rungs of the net. Then the great waves bludgeoned him unconscious. But still he clung there, frozen solid, a part of the net itself. Twice the ship rolled him beneath the waves; then he was seen, and the net was hauled aboard.

They had to cut through the rungs of the net, because his hands couldn't be unclenched from them. They had to saw through the planks of the packing-case, because he was frozen solidly on to it. Then they took him below, and cut off his clothes, and put him into a bunk and made him sick, to cough the oil out of his lungs. They gave him all the blankets and all the warmth and all the care they could; and though for two days he hung very near to death, in the end he lived—the only survivor from the S/S *Denver Willis*.

As though the sinking of the merchantman had been its last insensate gesture of malevolence, the storm that evening began to lessen. It lessened slowly; so slowly that its slackening could be measured only by instruments and not by sense. But the instruments did not lie, and that night the wave-crests fractionally lowered and the wind grudgingly dropped. By midnight the waves had fallen to fifty feet, and the wind to a mere ninety knots.

But the night brought problems of its own. For now, as the centre of the storm passed, the wind began to shift. It shifted capriciously, swinging at random between west and north. And the waves, whipped up by the wind, shifted too; so that to the steady

march of rollers out of the west was now added a northerly cross-chop. The night became full of treacherous surprises; full of unlikely waves that came crashing out of the darkness; full of sheets of spray that pitted into the ships from unexpected quarters. In the uncertain sea the helmsmen needed all their watchfulness, all their skill, to prevent their vessels being flung broadside on.

Viper became especially unmanageable—for an aircraft carrier with her overhanging flight deck is at the best of times an unstable vessel. Twice she was flung beam on to the heavy seas; twice she rolled to the very limit of her safety margin. Then, in the small hours of the morning, she came very close to foundering.

For some time she had managed to meet the waves head on, and Jardine was beginning to think she had weathered the worst of the storm, when a little before dawn a sudden shift of the wind caught her on the bow. She yawed off course. She fell away into an approaching trough. At the bottom of the trough she toppled into an unexpected hollow, a little whirlpool of scooped-out sea. Before she could answer the helm she swung broadside on. The approaching wave was not an especially large one; normally *Viper* would have ridden it safely and swung back into wind; but suddenly the crest of the wave was ripped away; ten thousand tons of water were peeled off, were flung like an avalanche against the side of the carrier.

Viper was smashed on to her beam.

For ten to fifteen seconds she hung there, waterlogged and helpless, on the verge of turning turtle. The seas swept green across her flight deck; they crushed her down; they beat her low into the water. All over the ship lashings parted; lifelines snapped; and stores, drip-trays, ammunition boxes and men were flung to the deck. Then the wave passed. Abruptly the avalanche of water was cut off. Slowly and unwillingly *Viper* heaved herself back to an even keel. She met the next wave on her bow, the next head on. For the moment she was safe.

Men picked themselves dazedly up. In bridge, engine-room, mess-deck and store, damage was quickly assessed. Everywhere it was found to be superficial; everywhere except in the hangar.

From here came a cry for help; a cry that was desperate and urgent; a cry that brought fear, turning like a knife at Jardine's bowels.

The hangar of an aircraft-carrier looks to the uninitiated like a

random parking-ground of planes, each of which is ensnared in a casually woven spider's web. But the experts know better. To them each plane is scientifically and accurately placed; and the "spiders' webs" are ropes, guide lines and hawsers, all of which are arranged with mathematical precision to withstand the greatest possible strain. In bad weather these lashings are increased in size and number, until the planes look like embryo cocoons, and the hangar is criss-crossed with a closely woven maze of ropes. It would seem impossible, under the weight of so many ropes, for anything to move an inch.

Now, after twenty-four hours of storm, the Senior Air Engineer Officer, Commander Aplin, was still keeping the hangar personnel at work, checking and tightening the lashings. For he knew that if a plane did somehow work itself free it could easily be flung the length and breadth of the flight deck, smashing and crippling whatever lay in its path, turning the squadron in a couple of minutes into a knacker's yard of scrap.

So hour after hour riggers and fitters had been crawling among, over and under the planes, lashing down control surfaces, tightening ringbolts, doubling and then trebling every rope, hawser and guide-line. And they did their work well.

When *Viper* was flung on to her beam, the strain on the ropes securing the planes was unbelievable. But in the whole hangar only one parted. By ill-luck this was an especially vital one; a lashing which held down the tail-plane of a damaged Swordfish. As *Viper* heeled over, the lashing, with a snap like the crack of an elephant whip, parted; its end seared into the hangar bulkhead; a little spiral of smoke floated upward; and the tail-plane swung free. The ropes holding the fuselage tautened under the added strain. For a second they held; then with reports flung like rifle-shots around the hangar, they too were ripped apart. With a grinding wrench the plane shook herself free; with gathering momentum she slithered across the canted deck; with a shuddering jar she smashed into the aircraft parked beside her.

A dozen ratings who had flung themselves at the Swordfish in a vain attempt to hold her were tossed aside, like spray from a feathered oar. One shattered his knee-cap and rolled screaming into the scuppers; one lay inert, his head lolling sideways at an unnatural angle.

Aplin stood appalled. He saw some men rushing towards the plane, others rushing away from it. He heard a confused medley

of sound; orders and counter-orders, cries of pain and fear.

He snatched up a megaphone.

"All hands! All hands!" His voice flooded out like the roar of a foghorn. "Muster in Bay Eleven. Hold that Swordfish fast. Pin her against the bulkhead."

The shouting died; the mêlée sorted itself out, as from every corner of the hangar men began to claw their way for'ard to grapple with the breakaway plane.

Aplin snatched up the telephone that connected him with the bridge. He spoke urgently to Jardine, and a second later the Captain's voice came sharply over the ship's tannoy.

"Emergency! Emergency! Port watch muster in the hangar. At the double! Repeat at the double!"

Once again the Swordfish slithered across the deck, flinging off a handful of men. Once again it splintered into the neighbouring plane. Then, as it swung back against the bulkhead, three dozen ratings flung themselves on to it. With shoulders arched and muscles cracking they fought to hold it, to pin it against the hangar wall. On the shifting deck they slipped and slithered; they were flung against stanchions and bulkheads; they were trampled underfoot. But they held their ground. They could never have done it alone; but with every second more men—the port watch brought racing to the hangar by Jardine's emergency call—hurled themselves into the fray. Some got a hand to the plane, others packed up against the first men's backs, forming a chaotic rugger scrum, a scrum that by sheer weight of numbers held the Swordfish fast.

As quickly as it had come the crisis passed. What remained to be done—the re-securing of the Swordfish and the neighbouring plane—would be difficult; difficult and dangerous. But Aplin knew it could be done.

An hour later he was able to report to Jardine that the planes were safe; that the hangar was back to full efficiency.

But he was taking no chances. He divided his personnel into two watches. One he kept constantly on duty—officers, petty officers and ratings alike—working their way round the planes; tightening, checking and double-checking every nut, ring-bolt and hawser.

All that night they kept it up, crawling about on hands and knees, squirming under wing-roots, peering with torches into dark recesses, working their way endlessly round, up, over and across each of the lashed-down planes. At first the novelty of the work

outweighed the discomfort; but after a couple of hours the novelty began to wear away. Several men, caught unawares by a sudden pitch or roll, were flung sharply against plane or bulkhead; several more were violently sick, their stomachs outraged by the sweet, sickly odour of oil that clung, close and cloying, to the planes. It was dirty, exhausting, cramping work. At 8 a.m. the watches changed over; and for a few hours ropes were tightened and bolts screwed home with a renewed energy and precision. But soon the new hands became as tired and cramped and trembling as the old; and as dawn found *Viper* still riding out a storm of little-diminished fury it began to seem to those in the hangar that they could not remember a world that consisted of anything else but bolts and ropes and straining planes, seen dimly through a sweat-wet haze of cramp and tiredness and pain.

But at least in the hangar it was warm; which was more than could be said for the bridge, where for the last forty-eight hours Captain Jardine had remained, self-locked into the least wind-swept corner.

The cold and damp had long ago seeped through his seaboots into the muscles of his legs; the wind and spray had long ago numbed his fingers to unfeeling stalactites of ice. But still he stayed there, hour after hour, immobile as though he were frozen solid, a part of the ship herself.

Every now and then he saw, swinging across the backcloth of night, a tiny red or green navigation light. For perhaps a second it would burn clearly; then some unseen mountain of water would rise between them, and the light would disappear. But it was comforting to know that some ships at least were still with him.

At ten o'clock MacLeod brought up the morning met. report, Jardine found it difficult to read. His eyes, sore and inflamed, refused to focus. He handed the report to the Officer of the Watch.

"Read it, please," he said.

The Officer of the Watch shone his torch on to the printed sheet. *December 9th,*" he read. "*Dawn report.*"

Dawn! thought Jardine. And sea and sky so dark that ships in the next column can't be seen....

"*The centre of the depression has now passed over the convoy, and is moving rapidly toward the Norwegian coast. Strong northerly gales will continue throughout the morning, decreasing slowly p.m. As the wind drops, there will be a temporary improve-*

ment in conditions; then as the cold front passes over the convoy, cloud will again thicken and lower; heavy snow blizzards will develop in the evening.

Grade "C" forecast till 2200/9:

WIND	Northerly: 70-80 knots; decreasing slowly.
WEATHER	Fine in late morning and early afternoon: snow blizzards in late afternoon and evening.
CLOUD	7/10 at 1,000 feet, rising and decreasing temporarily; then increasing to 10/10 and lowering to 300 feet in the late afternoon.
SEA	Heavy northerly swell, decreasing.
OUTLOOK FOR TOMORROW	Gale gradually dying out as the depression moves eastward. Wind and sea decreasing; snow will end abruptly during the night.

"Thank you," Jardine said.

He put the report into his pocket, and anchored himself again into his corner of the bridge.

After a little while he saw that the colour of the eastern sky was changing. It was no longer black, but a pale anaemic grey. It was dawn. The start of another day in the convoy to Murmansk.

That morning the weather began to improve. The greatest improvement was in the wind; it no longer screamed; it merely roared; and it had lost the power to rip away whole patches of the sea. Soon the cloud base rose, the sky lightened, and the visibility improved; by noon all ten of the larger vessels were in sight. Jardine called MacLeod to the bridge.

"Where," he said, "is the snow?"

"It will aye be coming, sir."

Jardine looked at the rising sky.

"God forgive you," he said, "if you're wrong. I won't."

"Aa'll noo be wrong."

Soon the sky was lighter than it had been for days. The First Lieutenant and the senior officers of Jardine's staff waited impatiently for him to signal the convoy to reassemble; but Jardine made no signal; he watched the sky.

It was two o'clock before the strata of whitish cloud began to

darken. It darkened first into long, wind-torn ribbons of grey that streaked horizontally across the sky; then the ribbons thickened and merged, darkened and lowered; they turned into little patches of turbulent cloud; and from these there came the snow.

It came at first in sudden, isolated squalls, with tiny brittle flakes that were more like hail than snow. Then, as the cloud patches became lower, darker and thicker, the flakes became heavier and moister, and the squalls more frequent. By three o'clock *Viper* was pitching into a full arctic blizzard; the cold front swinging out of the north behind the depression centre. Visibility dropped to zero.

Keeping together had been difficult in the storm; in the blizzard it wasn't to be thought of. Jardine did the only possible thing. He broadcast a coded message, and the last of his ships—vessels that had clung together through day after day of ordeal by bomb, torpedo, wind and sea—broke apart. With their navigation lights invisible and their radar sets unworkable, the risk of collision was too great for them to stay together. The ten ships fanned out; five, ten or fifteen degrees away from the mean line of advance.

Soon they were pitching into utter darkness: blindly, gropingly, alone.

As the winds of autumn strip petals from a dying flower, so that evening the blizzard shredded away the last remnants of Jardine's ships. The convoy, as a convoy, simply ceased to exist.

But the vessels kept in touch by radio.

Jardine had thought carefully about the pros and cons of using their radio. Should he stay in contact with his ships, knowing that every signal he made would be picked up by German listening posts; or should he ban all transmission, leaving both his own vessels and the Germans in the dark? He decided that no matter what the cost he must keep in touch with his ships; and having made this decision, he put no limit to the number of signals sent. Indeed he encouraged his ships, especially the stragglers, to report every two or three hours, giving their estimated position, course and speed, and a brief report on their seaworthiness and weather.

These signals brought, during the night, a glow of comfort to the storm-driven vessels. Though battered to near-exhaustion, though shrouded in perpetual darkness, the signals told them they were neither forgotten nor alone. Even in their isolation they felt watched over, cared for. The radio made the night less dark, the

storm less frenzied, the thought of the morrow more endurable.

Soon after the blizzard started Jardine went below. For the moment there was nothing he could do, and he hadn't slept for the last three days. But he left orders to be woken the moment the snow eased off.

For eight hours the snow fell steadily. Then abruptly it stopped. At one moment *Viper* was pitching into a veil of darkness, the next she had broken out into a sky that was moonlit and clear. Occasional patches of cloud were racing low over the sea, stars of gemlike brilliance were reeling across the sky, and fairy lanterns, violet and silver and blue, were dancing above the northern horizon: the *aurora borealis*. Here, in the wake of the storm, the night was touched with a wild, tempestuous beauty; only the wide-spaced rollers, surging endlessly south-eastward, retained their original menace.

Jardine, now back on the bridge, took stock of the situation.

His first need was to fix *Viper*'s exact position. The dead reckoning plot showed her a little below the seventieth Parallel and some four hundred miles from Norway. But in the last few days accurate navigation had been impossible. He doubted if the plot was accurate to within a hundred miles.

With a good deal of difficulty the Navigating Officer took an astral fix. This showed the carrier well above the seventieth Parallel and four hundred and sixty miles from Norway.

The First Lieutenant pinpointed a spot midway between the two positions.

"I suggest we say we're here, sir. Until we get an accurate fix."

"Yes."

Carefully Jardine wrote out their estimated position on the back of a signal pad. He did a quick calculation; then called the Yeoman of Signals.

"Pass this," he said, "to all vessels. My position at midnight," he glanced at his pad, "will be 002.47° West; 70.30° North. My speed 3 knots. My course 350° . Report your estimated position and close with me at dawn."

After the signal had been sent, Jardine and the First Lieutenant paced the bridge. How many ships, Jardine wondered, would reply? Of those that did reply, how many would be able to close by dawn? He knew that the better weather would mean renewed attacks by U-boats and planes, perhaps by surface forces as well. Unless he gathered them in, his ships would be picked off one

by one; the most distant stragglers would be the first and easiest victims.

It was the best part of an hour before all the replies came in. Then the news was better than Jardine had dared to hope. All the escorts, and all the merchantmen but two, had acknowledged the call; and two-thirds of them said they could close by dawn.

Jardine called a staff conference. Together with *Viper's* senior officers he studied a chart of the north-eastern Atlantic. If their calculations were right, their ships would reassemble close to where the sea-bed rose to form Jan Mayen Island and the North-East Jan Mayen Ridge. They were, Jardine noted, a good deal to westward of the track they had been routed by; and they were forty-eight hours behind schedule. But that didn't trouble him.

"The important fact is," he said, "we're over half-way to Murmansk, and so far we've lost only a single merchantman."

"Pretty good," the First Lieutenant said, "considering."

In his heart Jardine agreed; but he knew the danger of over-confidence. He rapped sharply on the table.

"To business, gentlemen," he said. "Let's not congratulate ourselves too soon. Let's remember we haven't got a convoy at the moment. The question is, how are we going to reassemble it?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

JARDINE didn't like staff conferences. He kept them as short as possible, collecting information rather than opinions, making decisions rather than discussing them; and no one was surprised when the gathering of senior officers broke up after less than twenty minutes. They had discussed the weather conditions; they had pinpointed the assembly area; they had fixed the position of all their ships but two. The one thing they hadn't discussed was the basic problem that all the others led up to: how to reassemble the convoy. That was something Jardine wanted to decide alone.

He went below to his cabin to think things out. One problem worried him especially: should he use his aircraft to search for and bring in the stragglers? Was it worth risking his planes to save his ships? It was a difficult decision to make. Thinking of the losses his squadron had suffered already, he shivered. He felt suddenly

very tired; tired and uncertain and old. The problem seemed insuperable. After a while he called through to the bridge and spoke to Halsey.

"I want to see you, the C.O. and Bats," he said. "My cabin, right away."

When they came, he regretted having called them. He wasn't used to asking for help.

He had arranged four chairs round a table. On the table was a chart, a sheet of tracing paper and the latest met. report.

"Sit down," he grunted, when the last of the three had arrived; nervousness, they noticed, made his manner unusually abrupt. "I want your advice. First I'll give you the facts." He smoothed out the chart. "The convoy is scattered now, but I've ordered a rendezvous for dawn. Soon some twenty ships ought to be converging on this assembly area"—he pointed on the chart to a spot a little north of Jan Mayen Island. "Is that clear?"

The others nodded.

"Now what I expect to happen is this. At dawn some fourteen or fifteen ships will be near the assembly box. Visibility will be good; with a little help from the corvettes these ships should come together; then there's safety in numbers; they can look after themselves. But some five or six ships will be missing. They are the ones I'm worried about. The ships that are lost or are lagging astern. The stragglers.

"Now the problem is this. If we were a large convoy, I'd send corvettes to search for the stragglers and bring them in. But we're not a large convoy. If we'd a full squadron, I'd make *them* search for the stragglers; but we haven't a full squadron. If the weather was good, I'd risk flying the few planes we have; but the weather isn't good." He paused. "Now you're the experts on flying. That's why I want your advice. You know the circumstances. Now would you or wouldn't you use the planes?"

There was a long silence; then Halsey asked how many stragglers there were likely to be.

"And," added Marsden, "how far astern are they?"

Jardine smoothed out the piece of tracing paper and superimposed it on the chart. On it the position, course and speed of every vessel was clearly marked; a cross for warships, a circle for merchantmen. Most of the crosses were reasonably near the assembly box; but several of the circles were far astern—one by as much as ninety miles—and another was nearly as far to starboard.

"And two ships," said Jardine, "haven't answered yet. God knows where they are."

Young Jardine looked at his father. He felt suddenly disillusioned. Was this the man who had taught him to make his decisions alone, the man who walked by himself, the man he had looked up to as an acolyte to his God? It struck him—like a physical blow—that his father was an old man. His disenchantment turned to pity; but it was a pity without understanding. It is true that he realized something of the strain his father was facing; he understood a little of the loneliness of authority, the burden of command; but he thought his asking for help was a sign of weakness, a confession of failure.

Halsey and Marsden understood the position more acutely. To them Captain Jardine was a man who had run temporarily out of courage. They knew that each man has so much courage he can draw on; so much and no more. They knew that when courage dies, all dies; and that a man left without courage is like an empty shell. What can such a man do? Sometimes he breaks under the strain; sometimes he runs away; sometimes he borrows courage from others. Some men ask God for courage; Jardine was asking his friends. Halsey and Marsden were at once pleased and disturbed: pleased that Jardine should have come to them, disturbed at the prospect of added responsibility. Because they liked as well as respected the Captain they gave him no glib answers.

For a long time nobody spoke. Then Halsey said, quite simply: "The squadron will suffer losses, but I think the planes ought to be flown."

"I wouldn't feel happy," young Jardine volunteered, "about landing the Wildcats. Not in a sea like this."

The Captain looked at Marsden.

"It's your squadron," he said, "what do you say?"

"I think we should rule the Wildcats out. I agree with Bats there; the weather's too bad to land them. We've got eight Swordfish left. Half of these I'd keep in the hangar; we'll need them later, when we get to Kola Bay. The other half I'd use to round up the stragglers."

There was a short silence, then Jardine said:

"Thank you—all of you—for helping me."

He began to fold up the chart. Halsey half-rose, thinking the conference was over, but Jardine motioned him to sit down.

"One last point," he said. "It's over forty-eight hours since there

was any flying. Until a plane takes off, we won't know how bad conditions are; so the first plane off will run a rather special risk. I don't think a crew ought to be detailed off for a job like that. Perhaps, Marsden, you'd ask for volunteers: volunteers for a test flight?"

"Yes, sir. I'll do that."

"I'd like to see the pilot and observer before they take off."

"Very well, sir."

"There are some pilots I wouldn't want to go."

"I see."

"Yourself, for instance."

Beneath the table Marsden's hands tightened. "Surely, sir, a C.O. has some privileges."

Jardine's voice was sympathetic. "I know," he said, "just how you feel. For years now I've been asking men to do things I can't do myself. That's one of the bugbears of a senior rank. The simple fact is this. You're more use to me alive than dead. I'll not let you go on a job some other pilot could do equally well."

He stood up.

"I want a crew ready to take off an hour before dawn. Halsey, see they report to me on the bridge."

The conference broke up.

Through the night signals pulsated out, as every hour the ships of the convoy reported their dead-reckoning position to the carrier. As the weather improved, navigation—especially astral navigation—became easier, and the vessels were able to fix their positions more accurately. Those that had fallen astern increased speed; those that had been driven sideways, closed in. Soon Jardine and the First Lieutenant were able to visualize the pattern of the convoy as it would be at dawn.

The ships were drawing together well; remarkably well. Of their twenty-two vessels, all except one had now reported their position; and fifteen of them seemed likely to be in or near the assembly area by sunrise. That left six vessels to be rounded up. Of these, only two gave Jardine real anxiety: the *Empire Malcolmson* and the *San Antonio*. The former was heading off at a tangent, straight for Norway, either her steering was damaged or her navigation was badly at fault. The latter was the ship that had dropped out of convoy with a blocked oilpipe; this had taken twenty-four hours to mend, and now the *San Antonio* lay far astern, a lone ship

wallowing in the wake of the convoy; the answer to a U-boat's prayer. And she had aboard the crates of special equipment.

These two, Jardine decided, were too far away to be brought in by surface forces; they would have to be found and escorted back by air.

At seven o'clock the squadron were called to the crewroom, and Marsden asked for volunteers: volunteers for a weather test, to be followed if conditions were good enough by a search for the *San Antonio* and the *Empire Malcolmson*.

"I don't want you to volunteer as crews," he said, "but as individuals. We'll put pilots' names in this cap, observers' in that. The first name drawn out of each will form a crew."

While he was talking, young Jardine handed round slips of paper.

"If you want to volunteer," Marsden ended, "write your name on the paper; if you don't, leave it blank. In either case fold the paper up and drop it into a cap."

He left the room. When he came back he was glad to find that the first two slips he pulled out had names on them.

The caps were emptied out of a port-hole; the slips of paper fell fluttering into *Viper*'s wake; and there to all outward appearances was an end to the business of volunteering. But for one man things didn't end there; for one of the pieces of paper had been blank.

The first name out of the observers' cap was Kit James; the first out of the pilots', Vic Saunders. They reported to Jardine on the bridge, then went below for breakfast and briefing while their plane was brought on deck.

An hour later they took off in the pale half-light of dawn.

Viper was pitching heavily, and the take-off had to be timed to a split second—a fraction too soon and the Swordfish would follow the down-tilted deck into the sea; a fraction too late and she would crawl along the up-tilted deck and stall over the bows; the result in either case would be fatal. Saunders's timing was good; and the plane had reached her take-off speed by the time the upward thrust of *Viper*'s bows flung her into the air.

Then came the time of uncertainty, as Saunders and James began their weather test. Jardine watched anxiously from the bridge. Would the wind, he wondered, be too strong for them?

For twenty minutes Saunders circled the carrier. The wind was strong and blustering; but not so strong he couldn't keep the

Swordfish under control. He flew north, south, east and west. He flew at three hundred, five hundred and a thousand feet, and found a wind at each height. He flew through cloud and under cloud. He reported on turbulence and icing. And when Jardine had studied the figures that were radioed back, he smiled and said the weather was good enough for flying.

Then the rounding up of the stragglers began. A second Swordfish, that had been waiting on deck, took-off to search for the *Empire Malcolmson*, and Saunders and James disappeared downwind on their search for the *San Antonio*.

They knew that she wouldn't be easy to find. Her estimated position (and it could only be a very approximate one) was eighty-five miles due south of the carrier. This put her dead downwind; and with a fifty-knot gale behind her the Swordfish soon reached the spot where the *San Antonio* should have been.

She wasn't there.

Visibility was good—fifteen to twenty miles. They ought, thought James, to be able to find her. But he knew that in less than an hour they must be heading back for the carrier; for into wind, the return trip would take far longer than the outward. They dropped markers and smoke-floats and found an exact wind; then they began a square-search. At the end of half an hour there was no sign of the *San Antonio*, nor after forty minutes, nor after fifty. The minutes passed; their petrol drained away; and still the A.S.V.X. screen shimmered white and empty; no smoke-smudge darkened the empty canvas of the sea.

James switched their radio to intercom.

"We ought to be heading for home, Vic."

"Whenever you say."

"Are you O.K. for another ten minutes?"

"If you are."

"Right. Another ten minutes it is."

They had time to finish one more leg of their square search. Half-way through it James saw on his screen a faint shadow at a range of twenty miles. They turned towards it. Soon Saunders saw a starshell fall golden into the sea. And a moment later they sighted the *San Antonio*.

For two days the merchantman had been alone, her only contact with the world a crackling, impersonal radio. Alone she had spent twenty-four nightmare hours rolling beam on as she repaired her oilpipe. Alone she had ridden out the blizzard. Alone she had

struggled through the night to close with the rest of the convoy. It had begun to seem to her crew that they would be alone for ever. Then out of the alien sky came the Swordfish.

As Saunders swept low over the merchantman, her crew came tumbling on deck. They capered, shouted and cheered; they waved oilskins, lifejackets and flags; an Aldis flashed incoherently from the bridge.

But for Saunders and James joy at finding the *San Antonio* was tempered by anxiety over their petrol—they should have been heading back for the carrier this last quarter of an hour. Quickly James flashed the merchantman by Aldis:

"Sorry we can't stay. No petrol. Your correct course to close with convoy is 024°. Repeat 024°. Another plane will be with you soon."

The Swordfish banked away; before the *San Antonio* had started her reply, she was heading for home.

The first thing James did was to give Saunders a course—028°. He didn't tell him their lives depended on how accurately it was steered, for that was something both of them knew. Then he called up *Viper* and reported the *San Antonio*'s position—now the merchantman had been found she could be given cover until she caught up with the convoy. After that there was nothing more he could do; nothing but check and recheck his plot, and listen to the rhythmic beat of their engine and the dull roar of the headwind. They had been airborne now a little over two hours; which meant they had roughly two hours left to cover the eighty-odd miles back to the carrier. It would have been easy without the headwind. After checking his plot for the fifth time James estimated that if all went well they would reach *Viper* about ten minutes before they ran out of fuel.

After three-quarters of an hour he tuned up his A.S.V.X. On the flickering screen the convoy stood out indistinctly at a range of forty-five miles. Their course looked accurate.

"I think," he said to Saunders, "we're going to make it."

But a few minutes later a message came through from *Viper*. The radio operator's voice was clear and cheerful.

"Hullo Seagull Five. Treetop calling. Radio silence will come into operation forthwith. At 12.15 convoy is leaving the assembly box. Course 023°. Speed 5 knots. If you have any message pass it now."

James was silent. He felt a slow paralysis creeping over him, as

if his blood was congealing to ice. It was several minutes before he switched his radio to transmit.

"Hullo Treetop," he said. "We've no message for you."

He looked at his watch. In a few minutes the convoy would be under way. They wouldn't be getting under way without cause—probably, he thought, they'd been spotted. But why in God's name, he asked himself, did they have to move off on a course of 023° , dead away from him, so that every turn of their screws took them so much farther from his plane. He realized they would never catch up with the carrier now. Somewhere astern of the convoy the last drop of their petrol would be drained away.

Back in the carrier it was one of those mornings when everything goes right.

A few minutes after the first Swordfish had disappeared to search for the *San Antonio*, challenge and recognition signals were exchanged with a warship fine on *Viper*'s bow. It was the *Atalanta*—for a terrible moment Jardine had thought from her silhouette it was the *Brandenberg*—and she had with her a merchantman and two corvettes. The latter, much to their captain's disgust, Jardine sent off to round up the nearer stragglers; then beneath a gradually paling sky he settled down to wait for his ships to reassemble.

They came slowly, hesitantly, one by one; limping in like storm-drenched animals creeping back to shelter. Most of them showed signs of their ordeal by storm; some had especially terrible scars. One of the corvettes was badly down by the stern, and her after-deck lay buckled, almost stove in. One of the merchantmen was listing heavily; her bridge, crumpled by the full impact of a wave, lay half-flattened aslant her deck. Another had her funnel knocked sideways, and was belching sporadic clouds of smoke. They were a scarecrow armada; battered, salt-caked, ice-encrusted; but Jardine was happy to see them, happy as if they had been the most powerful and majestic warships.

One ship he was especially glad to see: the *Valeriana*: the vessel that hadn't replied to his signals. Now as she came labouring in from the south, she flashed the carrier by Aldis that she was undamaged except for her radio, which was smashed beyond repair.

By ten o'clock eleven vessels had reached the assembly box. Jardine began to feel, once again, that he was in command of a manageable body of ships. He thought the sea was probably too

high for U-boats to attack. But he was taking no chances. He kept the vessels zig-zagging round the four sides of a square; and he kept an A/S patrol orbiting the assembly box. Young Jardine had plenty of batting now. But his two days' rest had refreshed him. In spite of the mountainous seas, he landed the planes safely.

By eleven o'clock sixteen vessels had come in; and by noon the miracle had been achieved; within twelve hours of the blizzard's ending, all Jardine's vessels but two were back in convoy; and these two—the *Empire Malcolmson* and the *San Antonio*—had both been found, and were being escorted back.

The *Empire Malcolmson* was on the convoy's bow. Jardine wasn't worried over her; she could cut across to join him; by nightfall she should be back in station. It was the *San Antonio* that he was anxious for. She was sixty miles astern. He couldn't wait for her indefinitely; and when the convoy did get under way, their course for Murmansk would take them directly away from her. Another difficulty was that to give her continual and separate A/S cover would tax his few remaining Swordfish—not to mention his batsman—to breaking point. If he had to keep patrols in the air, his already depleted aircrew would be forced to fly three hours, rest three hours and then fly again; and that sort of routine was more than flesh and blood could stand.

He cursed and grumbled at the *San Antonio*. He sent her a spate of signals urging her to increase speed, ordering her to close more quickly. But he never thought of leaving her. She was the ninety-and-ninth of his sheep. Somehow, no matter what the cost, he would bring her back.

He had just made up his mind to wait for her till nightfall, when the Yeoman handed him a signal: a U-boat contact from the patrolling Swordfish. A few minutes later the vibrating thud of depth-charges rolled among his ships. His assembly area had been found. His convoy had been rediscovered.

He couldn't risk waiting now; he couldn't stay in the assembly box while planes and U-boats massed for an attack. He reimposed radio silence; then reluctantly, a little after noon, set course for Kola Bay. But he didn't desert the *San Antonio*; he didn't leave her alone. He sent back a destroyer to keep her company, to make the coming night less lonely; and he decided he'd keep an aircraft over her as well.

The convoy got under way. They stood north-eastward. The waves were steep and grey-green; the wind was east and razor-

sharp; the sky was white and cold as marble. Jardine was glad to be on the move. Now, once again, each turn of their screws was taking them nearer to Murmansk; another three days, he thought, and we'll be there.

Then he remembered Saunders and James.

His gladness ebbed suddenly away. Sea and wind and sky took on a bleaker aspect. How many more of my squadron will die, he thought, before this convoy is over? He looked at the uncaring waves and shivered. He looked at his hand, clasping the bridge-rail, and saw it was trembling. Inside his brain there began a strange fluttering: the wing-beats of an imprisoned bird. Suddenly he spun round. He snapped open a voice-pipe.

"Captain here, Stone. How long has that Swordfish been airborne?"

"Saunders, sir? Three hours twenty-five minutes."

"If we hold course, will he get back?"

"No, sir. I've just been working it out. He'll ditch about fifteen miles astern."

Slowly Jardine put the voice-pipe down. Astern of the convoy were a pilot and observer whose lives he held in the balance. If he kept on course, they would die; if he turned back, they would live. He knew what he ought to do: to turn the convoy round would be to endanger the lives of some eight thousand men, to risk the loss of twenty-three ships and a hundred thousand tons of supplies—not to mention the secret equipment. Judged by any yardstick it was a risk that couldn't be justified. He saw very clearly what he ought to do.

But he turned the convoy round. He headed back for the assembly box.

Twice in the next half hour the roll of depth-charges echoed among the zigzagging ships. Once a destroyer, mistaking a cloud-shadow for a Junkers, loosed off her ack-ack. Nerves were laid bare. No good, it was felt, would come of turning back. Jardine was asking for trouble.

He knew it was true. He knew it wasn't a well-calculated risk he was taking. It was a surrender to sentiment. Impulsive. Uncharacteristic. Without justification. It was a gamble that didn't deserve to pay off.

By the time they got back to the assembly box the Swordfish had been airborne four hours. It would be too ironic, thought Jardine, if she didn't find us now. He looked at his watch. The

minutes passed; four hours five minutes; four hours ten minutes.

Then, low on the southern horizon, the Swordfish was sighted, only a few feet above the waves.

Viper swung into wind. A sudden quietness spread over the flight deck as plane and carrier converged. Every second was precious now. As he watched from his batwing platform young Jardine could hear, in his imagination, the engine stuttering as it sucked in the last cupfuls of fuel.

Saunders didn't bother about an approach, he lowered his arrestor hook and came sliding on to the flight deck in an awkward, skidding turn. His petrol, young Jardine realized, must be registering zero. It was no time for conventional doubts. He held his bats level. He made no signals until the plane came crabwise over the round-down; then in one movement he straightened her up and gave her the signal to cut. She plummeted down, heavily but safely, on the last of the arrestor wires. And as she taxied for'ard of the barrier, her engine gave three choking coughs and cut, stone dead. When they looked in her fuel-tanks they found there wasn't enough petrol to cover an upended sixpence.

Nothing succeeds like success. Because it had ended happily, many people told themselves that Jardine's return had been justified. But he knew better. Never again, he told himself. Miracles don't happen twice.

All afternoon the convoy moved northward into a lessening head sea. Jardine expected to be attacked. He kept his ships closed up at action stations. But of planes or U-boats there was never a sign.

At two o'clock the *Empire Malcolmson* rejoined them. All his ships except the *San Antonio* were back in convoy now. The Germans, he and Halsey agreed, by not attacking while the convoy was scattered, had missed their opportunity. For this, MacLeod told them, they must thank the storm-centre which was now lashing the Norwegian coast, preventing the aircraft from taking off and the U-boats from leaving harbour.

They used their unexpected breathing space to good advantage. That afternoon, in merchantmen and warships, the damage caused by the storm was repaired. Equipment was tested and tuned-up; guns were lubricated and realigned; decks were hosed clean of ice. And in *Viper*'s hangar Aplin achieved a minor miracle; the two shattered Swordfish were dismantled and their undamaged

parts combined into a single serviceable plane; a phoenix that rose slowly from a welter of useless scrap.

And all the while one Swordfish circled the convoy and another the *San Antonio*. Plane after plane took off, flew its two-hour patrol, landed-on, was refuelled and re-armed, and then took off again. And soon it was twilight.

The day died angrily in red and ebony, with a great haloed sun, framed by cumulus, turning the sea into a field of blood. Jardine looked at the sea, the innocent, treacherous sea. He suspected it was not as empty as it looked. He suspected (though he could get no proof of this) that from far astern a U-boat had been shadowing them, was shadowing them still. A little before dark he altered course to the east; he hoped the U-boat had seen; later, when it was quite dark, he would increase speed and swing back to the north.

At four o'clock he handed over to the First Lieutenant and went below. On the way to his cabin he looked into the Ops Room. His son was there, cat-napping again between patrols, though with an aircraft to land every hour he got only a few minutes' sleep at a time. The dark circles under his eyes, the captain noticed, were coming back.

He checked the exact position of the *San Antonio*. She was less than forty miles astern. She ought, he reflected, to be all right with a plane and a warship to guard her. By dawn she should trouble him no more, she should have caught the convoy up. She was, he and Stone agreed, a lucky ship. Not many vessels ploughing a solitary course in the wake of a convoy would have survived.

They didn't know that even as they were talking the *San Antonio* was fighting for her life.

In spite of the storm, six reconnaissance aircraft had managed to take off from Mosjoen; and it was one of these—a Blom and Voss seaplane—that sighted the *San Antonio*. She sighted her at twilight, as the merchantman's silhouette stood out sharply in the path of the setting sun; and an easy victim she looked. The German pilot set his bomb-release switches to live, and eased into a confident dive.

Then he spotted the Swordfish. Mistaking her for a patrolling fighter, he pulled hurriedly back into cloud. Emerging cautiously from time to time he studied her silhouette; he couldn't understand why she was moving so slowly. Then he identified her. A

Swordfish! Here was no terrible fighter armed with machine-gun and cannon; only an unarmed, obsolescent biplane with a speed even slower than his. His confidence restored, he left the cloud and came diving down on the merchantman. He was a little disconcerted to see that the Swordfish had taken up a position between him and his target. But how, he asked himself, could an unarmed biplane hope to stop him.

The same thought was puzzling Marsden and his observer, who for the last ten minutes had been watching the Blom and Voss with an alternate amusement and dismay.

"Alas!" Marsden observed, as at last the German pulled away from the cloudbank, "he's recognized us. See how bravely he's coming on!"

He headed straight for the seaplane. They met midway between merchantman and cloud. Tracer came spitting at Marsden, but he bucketed beneath it, and the two planes hurtled together, head-on. The German pilot was young and inexperienced. He thought he was going to be rammed. Frightened, he flung the seaplane aside. His first run-in had been thwarted.

The Blom and Voss banked ponderously round. As she started to come in again, a ragged burst of ack-ack cracked out from the *San Antonio*'s single bofors. The shells burst extremely wide. Marsden, who had no high opinion of Merchant Navy gunfire, looked round in alarm. The sea, he noticed, was darkening; but not quickly; not quickly enough. He realized that his was a forlorn hope, a lost cause. Once or perhaps twice he might frighten the seaplane off, but not indefinitely. The best he could hope for was to delay the inevitable; perhaps if he delayed it long enough darkness would make the attack more difficult, or perhaps the destroyer (which he knew Jardine had sent) would come to his aid.

The second time the Blom and Voss came in she tried to by-pass the Swordfish by diving round her, down to sea level. Marsden headed her off, and at the last moment cut suddenly in front of her and dropped two of his depth-charges. Twin pyramids of water leapt skyward, straight in the German pilot's path. Spray and falling water blotted out the merchantman. Again, angrily, the German flung the seaplane aside. His lips tightened. He'd stand no more interference. He'd settle with the Swordfish first. But when he looked round for her, she was nowhere to be seen.

"Herr Leutnant!" the alarmed voice of his navigator crackled in his earphones. "She's close behind us. On our tail."

Outraged, he flung the seaplane round the darkening sky, twisting, banking, diving, side-slipping. But still the Swordfish clung there. It was unthinkable that he couldn't shake her off; a challenge to his superiority; an affront to his dignity. He opened full throttle, and toppled the seaplane into a long, screaming dive. His air-speed built up; a hundred-and-twenty knots, a hundred-and-forty, a hundred-and-sixty. The Swordfish began to lag behind; far behind. The German pilot was elated. He hardly noticed where his dive was taking him.

Aboard the *San Antonio* the bofors crew held their fire as, less than a mile to starboard, the seaplane came sweeping down on a course near-parallel to theirs. Then as she came beam-on they opened up.

The first salvo burst straight in front of her nose.

The German pilot had forgotten the merchantman. Startled, he swung aside, swung straight into the second salvo, which, clean as a bill-hook topping nettles, scythed off the seaplane's tail. Engines screaming, the great plane toppled seaward. She entered the water neatly, with hardly more spray than is made by a plummeting skua; and no trace of her was seen again.

Soon afterwards it was dark.

As the sun set, the sea changed colour. It changed from green to grey, from grey to amethyst, and then from amethyst to black. Over the darkening waters Marsden flew low, his Aldis winking congratulations at the *San Antonio*. But he couldn't believe that the affair had really come to an end. The Blom and Voss was destroyed. There was no doubting that. But had she, Marsden wondered, radioed her base; had she, before she was shot down, passed back the *San Antonio*'s course and speed? If she had the Germans would have a pointer to the position of the convoy; and they would know that in the convoy's wake was a tempting target: a solitary, unguarded merchantman.

Marsden's fears were well-founded. For the seaplane had in fact broadcast not only to Mosjoen but also on the secret U-boat frequency; and a little to eastward of the *San Antonio* a submarine that had surfaced to charge her batteries picked the message up. She was ideally positioned for a night attack. As the sun set, she went down to periscope depth and began to head for the *San Antonio*. Her navigation was good. Slowly their tracks converged.

It was nine o'clock that evening when Haysom and Tregoning

took off in bright moonlight. Theirs, it was hoped, would be the last patrol to cover the *San Antonio*.

As they headed for the merchantman, now less than twenty miles astern, Haysom was silent. He was thinking; and his thoughts were far from happy; for the blank piece of paper dropped that morning into the volunteering cap had been his. Ever since, he had tried to think of other things; of his parents, of his home, of the Purbeck Hills he loved; but all these were shadows now, unsubstantial things, the memory of them blotted out by the image of a piece of paper on which he had failed to write his name.

Moonlight slanted into the cockpit, lighting up the dials of his instrument-panel, gleaming on the knuckles of a flying-glove clenched too tightly on to the control column. Whatever happened, Haysom thought, Tregoning must never know what he had done; though he could no longer respect himself, at least he still could warm himself a little in the glow of the man who admired him.

He heard Tregoning give him an alteration of course. Automatically he banked the plane on to its new heading, and a few minutes later they found the *San Antonio* and began to circle her at a range of ten miles.

And at much the same time the U-boat that had been converging on the merchantman since sunset picked her up on its hydrophones. Cautiously she surfaced. She spotted the *San Antonio* at once, a dark smudge on the moonlit horizon; she saw the destroyer too; then her radar picked up the patrolling plane. Swiftly she submerged down to periscope depth.

The U-boat Commander realized his task wouldn't be easy. But he was skilful and experienced. He stalked the *San Antonio* with patience and cunning. Hour after hour he edged cautiously in, a few yards at a time, while the moon reeled silently among the clouds, her silver light falling impartially first on hunter, then on hunted, then on a wingtip of the circling plane.

It was four hours before the Commander made his attack. He chose his moment well, when destroyer and plane were both on the far side of the *San Antonio*, and the merchantman was silhouetted clearly in a pathway of moonlit sea. Then he moved in: in little submerged rushes; three hundred yards under water, then up to periscope depth. The *San Antonio* grew larger in his sights. She swung beam on. At last she filled the whole of his viewfinder.

It was five months since the Commander had claimed a sinking.

This time he intended to make sure. To be doubly certain of the merchantman's exact course, range and speed he surfaced—for less than a third of a minute. Then he launched his torpedoes: a salvo of six.

They were well aimed.

He snapped the periscope down. The U-boat crash-dived. Her crew listened eagerly for the muffled explosions. But they listened in vain. The minutes passed. They began to move uneasily. Then the splitting roar of a depth-charge turned their expectancy to terror. A second explosion flung them to the deck. The lights went out; there was a noise of ripping metal, and the hiss of sea-water flooding into their hull. The U-boat was flung to the surface. For perhaps a minute she floated there, inert as a stunned salmon. Then, as she began to settle on an even keel, her conning-tower was flung open and her crew came tumbling on deck.

It was a hundred-to-one chance that saved the *San Antonio* and crippled the U-boat. In the few seconds that the latter had lain on the surface, Tregoning happened to be measuring his distance and bearing from the merchantman. As the U-boat surfaced and the echo came welling up on his screen, he was able to calculate her bearing in a flash. He shouted the bearing to Haysom. The plane banked sharply round and headed for the U-boat. Her course took her directly over the *San Antonio*. The second she was on course, the echo began to fade. Tregoning realized what was happening; realized the U-boat was diving, her torpedoes fired. The Swordfish was passing over the *San Antonio* now. With sudden inspiration he unhooked his Very pistol, leant out, and fired it over the merchantman's bow. A cascade of starshell burst in front of her. Sensing danger, but not knowing its whereabouts, the *San Antonio*'s master spun over his helm. The vessel heeled over; and as she swung head on to the U-boat, a look-out gave a great cry of fear.

"Torpedoes!"

If she hadn't been turning already the *San Antonio* would have made her last voyage. As it was, more by luck than judgment, she combed the torpedoes exactly. One passed a dozen feet to port; another brushed foaming past her beam—so close that the look-out saw little flecks of spray, flung from its warhead, spatter against their hull. Then the torpedoes were past.

The *San Antonio* gave a startled belch of smoke. Then, at full speed, zig-zagging crazily, she fled. And five hundred yards in her

wake the Swordfish flung herself on to the disappearing U-boat.

Haysom dived in fast. The U-boat herself had disappeared; but her slick—the little circle of churned-up sea where she had dived—remained; and into this fell two of Haysom's depth-charges. Twin pyramids of water heaved into the sky. As their spray subsided, a dark shadow came floating to the surface: the U-boat. She lay defenceless. Haysom kicked the Swordfish sideways and fell on to her again; this time for the kill. But half-way through his dive a mass of cumulus rolled ponderously across the moon; cloud shadows darkened the sea; the U-boat disappeared.

Cursing, Haysom pulled out of the dive. They would have to drop flares. It took the Swordfish several minutes to claw her way upwind to three hundred feet; and by the time Tregoning had tipped out the flares and the U-boat again stood out clearly, she was a very different target to the helpless vessel tossed up a few minutes before. For now she lay on an even keel; her gun crew were on deck; her defences were manned; a burst of tracer came flicking up at the plane.

If Haysom had stopped to think, if he hadn't been obsessed with the fear that Tregoning might think him a coward, he would have realized there was no need for him to attack the U-boat a second time—for already the destroyer, sweeping down on her fast, was less than a mile away. But he didn't think of this. He had one thought only: to attack and get it over.

"I'm going in," he shouted, "to finish her off."

He flung the Swordfish seaward—straight into a curtain of fire. A stream of explosive bullets ripped into their wing. Haysom screwed up his eyes. He heard a voice screaming, a terrible crescendo of fear—the voice he recognized as his own. A numbing sickness welled up in the back of his throat. But still the fear of being thought a coward obsessed him beyond all reason, beyond all the dictates of commonsense. His eyes half-shut, his hands frozen on to the controls, he held the shattered plane on course.

The tracer hit them again. One burst smacked into the engine, another shredded their damaged wing. Flames began to pour out, like a river of molten gold. Torchlike, the plane fell seaward. Her engine cut; the wind moaned softly through her shredded wings; she no longer answered her controls. But she kept on course, and through the flames Haysom saw the U-boat grow steadily larger.

He squeezed his firing-button and his last two depth-charges smacked into the sea almost beside the submarine. As they exploded the plane belly-flopped into the sea.

The U-boat was jerked out of the water like a harpooned marlin. Thrown bodily off the crest of a wave, she toppled broken-backed into the trough that followed; and there, broken and shattered, she flung up her bows and sank. There were four survivors, four of her ack-ack crew swept by the explosion off the deck; and of these, three were injured and did not live for long.

The Swordfish hit the water surprisingly lightly. Her landing-wheels had been shot away, and the undersurface of her fuselage skimmed glancing along the crest of a swell. Then her tail-plane caught in a cross-wave, and she smacked down and slewed sideways-on to the sea. Her damaged wing, the one containing the dinghy, broke off and was whirled away. Her tail-plane snapped off and sank. Geysers of steam leapt out of the water as it lapped her burning engine. But her fuselage stayed afloat.

Haysom was stunned by the impact of ditching. It was a couple of minutes before he recovered consciousness; and when he realized he was still alive he wanted to weep, not with relief but with fear, fear of what he knew would lie ahead. He began instinctively to unfasten his safety harness and scramble out of the plane. Then he remembered Tregoning. He lowered himself over the side, and treading water and clinging to the fuselage worked his way aft. The plane was low in the water, low enough for him to see into the observer's cockpit. He saw Tregoning crumpled up in a pool of moonlight, his left leg folded back.

He looked at his observer. It was every man for himself now. He'd be a fool, he told himself, to bother with an injured man. He was starting to move away when Tregoning opened his eyes. At first they were glazed and expressionless, then they filled with a familiar warmth.

"Hullo Will," Tregoning whispered.

"Hullo Bob. You badly hurt?"

Tregoning tried to hoist himself up, but his leg folded, and he fell to the bottom of the cockpit. The Swordfish rode the waves uneasily and settled a little lower. Haysom saw his observer watching him; his eyes were trusting.

He sighed and heaved himself up and fell wet and sodden into the cockpit.

The aircraft was breaking up as he struggled to hoist Tregoning

over the side. A wave came sweeping in. It rose swirling round his waist. The Swordfish settled lower; the next wave lapped his armpits; the next his neck. The wave after that closed over his head; but as it ebbed out of the cockpit it swept them with it.

Haysom felt himself bumping awkwardly along the fuselage. With one hand he grabbed the neck of Tregoning's flying suit; with the other he clung to a wing-strut. It took him five minutes to hoist his half-conscious observer on to the wing, and another five to lash him there with torn-off strips from his mae-west. Then, panting and sick with exhaustion, he clung to the wing; and as he hung there a numbing cold began to spread upward, out of his feet.

He looked at Tregoning with sudden anger. What a fool he was being. Why waste time with a man as good as dead? He decided, for the second time, to leave Tregoning.

He was working his way along the trailing edge, when with a ripping, splintering wrench the whole wing was torn from the fuselage. Disintegrating, it spun away. Haysom grabbed at the nearest section, the one Tregoning was lashed to. In a smother of foam they were swirled forward on the crest of a great wave. He felt his hands on the sea-wet fabric begin to slip; then they dropped behind the crest, and fell into calmer water. He re-tightened his grip. Coughing and choking he levered his elbows on to the makeshift raft. It was so light, his weight almost overturned it. He tried to think clearly, not just to resign himself to what was happening. But only one fact pierced the darkness of his despair. Their only hope was the raft. The raft was only three feet wide. It wasn't big enough for two.

He looked at his observer again. His anger turned to hatred. It was his life or Tregoning's now. Tregoning was half-dead already. Haysom decided to tip him off the raft.

Terror by this time had made him unbalanced, made him more than a little mad. He smiled as he pushed upward on his end of the raft; Tregoning's head was tilted under the water. He went on tilting the raft at regular, quite frequent, intervals.

A cloud rolled over the moon. It was the darkest hour of the night.

He tilted the raft gently, a little at a time, as though the rocking were the work of little waves—for he didn't want Tregoning to realize what he was doing. Once or twice he heard a muffled cry; once Tregoning's feet moved in feeble protest. He smiled; they

wouldn't move much longer. His smile turned to an agonized grimace as a sudden wave of cramp pulsated through his legs. He realized that soon he would be too weak to haul himself on to the raft. He redoubled his tilting.

At last he felt certain his observer must be drowned. Now to tip him off. Slowly he clawed his way round to where Tregoning's head had lain on the sodden fabric. He saw he had tried to raise his head, by wedging the mae-west beneath his chin—he was lashed too firmly down to move his body—but he hadn't altogether succeeded. His face shone in the moonlight, translucent, sea-wet and green. Haysom felt sure he was dead. He slapped his face. To his horror the eyes flickered open. Drained of their familiar warmth, they stared at him, accusingly. Tregoning tried to speak, but no words came; only a ribbon of pale-green saliva.

To Haysom, his observer's eyes were filled with condemnation; never again would they fill with a warmth he could bask in. He was revealed now for what he was: a coward: a coward and a murderer. The will-to-live ebbed slowly out of him. His grip on the fabric loosened, and he drifted away into the arctic sea.

After a little while he turned on to his back. Looking up he saw the stars. They seemed unbearably remote. It occurred to him that he had much in common with them. They too were cold; cold and unpitying; cold and unpitying and dead.

For some time Tregoning drifted on alone, his raft dipping erratically among the waves. Lost in a haze of pain and sickness and cold, he lay uncaring on the borderline of life and death.

Then strange things began to happen to him, things that distressed him because he could not understand them. A strange face, square and bearded, rose out of the sea; strange hands squeezed him between the shoulder-blades; and a strange voice shouted at him hoarsely in a language he did not understand. He was too tired to try and puzzle it out. For a while he was conscious of the raft being held and guided among the waves, then he lapsed into unconsciousness.

Suddenly a great light flooded over him. He opened his eyes and saw that the water had turned to gold. He wondered if he was dead. He listened and heard a dull rhythmic throbbing, like the engines of a ship. Then a wall of darkness moved towards him, blotting out the stars. He heard a confused sound of shouting. Beside him a rope smacked into the sea. The strange hands passed the rope under his armpits; then, twisting and bumping against

the body of another man, he was hoisted out of the water, drawn up the curve of a hull and tipped on to a deck.

He realized that he wasn't, after all, going to die.

Someone with gentle hands cut away his flying suit; and the prick of a needle toppled him headlong into a tunnel of twisting darkness.

It was two days later that he woke and found he was in a bunk; the bunk of the master of the *San Antonio*.

Later—a long time later—he felt he ought to write to Haysom's father; and this was the most difficult letter he ever had to sit down to.

... No one will ever know, he wrote, exactly what happened. But of one thing I'm certain. Will saved my life. I remember his hauling me out of the plane. I remember his tying me on to the raft. He didn't get on himself, instead he hung on to the edge of it. We stayed together for a long time, but in the end he must have dropped off with exhaustion, or perhaps with cramp ... then this German, the only survivor from the U-boat, saw the raft and swam across to it, and we were together when the San Antonio came back and picked us up. . . .

And if there were certain things about that night which Tregoning did not understand, and if he had any suspicions or any doubts, he kept them strictly to himself.

It was still dark when the *San Antonio* rejoined the convoy. Radio silence was in force, no light could be shown; so she just edged quietly into station.

From *Viper*'s bridge, Jardine watched her. She had, in the last twenty-four hours, caused him more trouble, more anxiety, than the rest of the convoy put together. But now that she was back all he had done for her seemed so very much worth while. For she was the sheep that had been lost and now was found, she was the prodigal who had come home at last. There were no flags to wave; there was no fatted calf to kill. But the joy of reunion is in the heart.

We'll be all right now, thought Jardine. Now we're together, now we are one, "Come the three corners of the world in arms and we shall shock them . . ."

CHAPTER NINE

AT dawn the advance screen passed the 73rd Parallel, less than a hundred and fifty miles from the edge of the pack-ice. Wind and sea had moderated a little; but the cold was sharper now, and the sun was heatless—even at noon it hugged the horizon, glowing dull red, like the embers of a dying fire, too weak to cast a shadow.

At ten o'clock two Wildcats climbed into the frozen sky; they climbed to a thousand feet, then they began to circle the convoy. They were waiting for the reconnaissance planes, which Jardine felt certain would come with the dawn. We may not be able, he thought, to stop them finding us, but at least we can make them pay. Look-outs were doubled; radar screens were conned more exactly; ack-ack crews were closed up at action stations, and hour after hour the Wildcats' vapour tracks pencilled the sky. But no planes came.

The hours passed. The brief fragment of daylight died; the convoy stood north-eastward, unmolested, apparently undiscovered. Soon it was night.

Some men were thankful, some were puzzled, others—including Jardine—were worried. For though neither plane nor U-boat had apparently come near the convoy for thirty-six hours, yet he had the feeling that they were being watched. Why he felt this, he couldn't say. But some sixth sense warned him that sea and sky were not as innocently empty as they seemed.

Soon after it was dark they crossed the 74th Parallel. Each hour now brought them appreciably closer to Murmansk. Two days more, thought Jardine, and we'll be at the approaches to Kola Bay. He paced the bridge, wondering why they were being neither shadowed nor attacked. It wasn't, he knew, because of the weather—for that, even over Norway, had cleared. It wasn't because the Germans couldn't find the convoy—of that he felt sure, for the U-boats and the Blom and Voss must have given them a pointer too obvious to be missed. And he couldn't believe that they were giving up, were letting him through unopposed. There was in fact only one possible explanation: they wanted him to go on, they were leading him into a trap. And it was a trap there could be no avoiding: for Kola Bay could be approached only one way—down a narrow strait of water between the pack

ice and the North Norwegian shore. Through this strait he would have to pass; there the trap would be set; he would somehow have to avoid it after it was sprung.

Below him, on *Viper's* flight deck, he saw his son walk slowly aft to the batting platform. For thirty-six hours young Jardine had been landing the planes at frequent intervals. He was tired now, physically and mentally. He knew the S.M.O. was watching him. He took a perverse pride in putting on a great show of energy whenever his path and the doctor's crossed; but God alone knows, he thought, how long I can keep it up. The last forty planes had touched down safely; but this, he knew, was something that couldn't go on for ever.

Viper swung into wind. He picked up his bats; he held them steady, and the forty-first plane began its approach.

At night a batsman can't see the plane he is guiding in. He can see only its lights. There are three of these; a blue navigation light on the tip of either wing, and a white "attitude" light on the tail. According to the position of these lights, the batsman makes his signals—the navigation lights tell him the plane's height, whether she is level and whether she is in alignment with the flight deck; the "attitude" light gives him an indication of the plane's speed, and tells him whether she is in the correct "three-point" attitude for touching down.

As soon as the forty-first Swordfish levelled up, young Jardine saw she was coming in too fast; he signalled her to lose speed; he waited for her tail to drop, for her "attitude" light to sink below the fuselage and into his line of vision. But no light came. Angrily he signalled her again—he had no patience with pilots who were slow to obey him. But still no light appeared. Then he noticed something else; something that nine batsmen out of ten would have missed. It was because Jardine was a good batsman, and because for each landing he keyed himself up to a state of extra-sensitive awareness, that he now noticed there was something odd about the approaching Swordfish: her navigation lights were ever so slightly shuddering, as if her wingtips were a-tremble. He realized suddenly that in spite of the non-appearance of her tail light she wasn't coming in too fast; she was coming in too slowly. She was about to stall; about to plummet into the sea. Frantically he signalled her to increase speed, to rise away from the deck. He heard her engine open up; saw her navigation lights rise skyward. He felt a surge of thankfulness. As he lowered his bats he was

trembling. If I'd gone on signalling her to slow down, he thought, I'd have dropped her straight into the sea.

He looked up at the Swordfish as she passed high over the flight deck. As he'd expected, there was still no sign of her tail light; either the bulb had gone or the electrical circuit had failed.

He realized he had no way now of assessing her altitude or speed. Landing her would not be easy. But at least he knew what he was faced with. He spoke to Halsey and a minute later an Aldis lamp was flashing at the plane.

Then came the bustle and tension of an emergency landing: the blare of the tannoy; the clearing of catwalks; the coming on deck of the asbestos-coated fire-fighters; the silence, as the plane came drifting in.

With the pilot's eyes shifting from young Jardine's bats to his own air-speed indicator, the first approach was ragged and abortive. Half-way through the second, *Viper* began to corkscrew, and again Jardine had to wave the Swordfish away. But I don't care, he thought, if this goes on all night; sooner or later he'll manage better than this. The fourth attempt was less erratic, and *Viper* was steady on course. As the plane came low over the round-down he gave it the signal to cut.

Only one man saw what happened next.

"The signal for a pilot to cut his engine," says the Batsman's Manual of Instruction, "consists of the lowering and crossing of the arms. It is customary for a batsman to accompany this signal with a half step forward, at the same time ducking beneath the wingtip of the approaching plane."

Jardine lowered and crossed his arms. He took a half step forward. He ducked. Then he realized that the plane was drifting sideways, was landing almost on top of him. It was too late to try and correct her. He flung himself to the deck. He felt a strange blast of air, warm and sickly sweet; then the plane was past. Down the length of the port catwalk men fell flat on their faces as the Swordfish came side-slipping towards them. Then, on the very edge of the flight deck, her arrestor-hook caught; her wingtop missed the bofors and oerlikons by inches; the self-centralizing wires pulled her back to the middle of the deck, and she came to a juddering halt.

There was quite a "to-do" afterwards, with official conferences, at which Halsey, young Jardine and the Swordfish pilot all made their reports. But apart from the fact that the plane had suddenly

and inexplicably drifted to port—without warning and without apparent cause—little was learned. It was, they realized, the third time this had happened since they'd pulled out of Scapa Flow.

But later that night, when young Jardine was enjoying a meal in the quiet of his cabin, someone knocked at the door. It was the Flight Deck Officer; he wanted to know what conclusion the conferences had come to.

"None," said young Jardine, "as far as I know."

He went on with his meal.

"Still in the dark, eh?"

"That's right."

"Maybe I could tell you a thing or two."

Jardine looked at the Deck Officer curiously. He had never cared for him much.

"If you've any bright ideas," he said, "Wings is the man you ought to be seeing, not me."

"I'll see him when I'm ready. Tell me, while you were batting did you notice a smell?"

"Yes; come to think of it, I did."

"What sort of smell?"

"Hot and sickly—rather like burnt oil."

"Before or after the plane passed you?"

"Before."

The Deck Officer wrote carefully in a small leather pocket-book. He looked smug.

"Look here," Jardine said, "if you've any idea what made the plane drift over, for God's sake tell someone. It's happened three times now."

"I'll tell someone. When I'm sure."

"That may be too late," said Jardine slowly, "for some people."

"Too bad." The Deck Officer closed his pocket-book with a snap.

"Thanks," he said, "for your help. As soon as I'm ready, I'll submit my report to the Captain."

"Take your time," said Jardine. "It's not your life you're playing with."

The door shut softly. I wonder how much, thought young Jardine, he really knows?

While young Jardine and the Deck Officer were talking, the convoy had been rediscovered. This in itself was no surprise to

Jardine, but the manner it came about confirmed his fears that they were being led into a trap.

A little after midnight four planes appeared on *Viper's* radar screens. They headed, accurately and confidently, for the centre of the convoy—as if they already knew its whereabouts. There was no chance of avoiding them, for the night was fine and moonlit, with only a scattering of cloud. The planes closed in steadily. When they were roughly five miles from the fringe of the convoy, they climbed to varying heights and began to circle the advancing ships, just out of gun-range and with clockwork precision. Here, thought Jardine, is the start of a preconceived plan. He wondered what would happen next. Together with the First Lieutenant he paced the bridge. The throb of aircraft engines filled the sky. Occasionally a glint of moonlight silvered fuselage or wing.

"D'you think," asked Jardine, "they're Junkers or Blom and Vosses?"

"Junkers I'd say, sir. The B and V's engines have a heavier beat." Jardine nodded. He had come to the same conclusion himself. "Notice anything else about 'em?"

The First Lieutenant shook his head.

"They're low. Unusually low for shadowing."

They strained their eyes. Twice the First Lieutenant saw the flash of silver on a turning wing. It's true, he thought. They're not more than three thousand feet.

Jardine moved restlessly. An idea came to him; he flicked up the lid of a voice-pipe and spoke to Stone.

"What range," he asked, "is the Swordfish doing her patrol?"

"Fifteen miles, sir."

"Call her up. Tell her to watch out for enemy aircraft. And," he added, "bring her in to five miles."

He was about to replace the voice-pipe when another thought came to him.

"Who," he asked, "is the pilot?"

"The C.O., sir."

"I thought he'd just done a patrol?"

Stone was apologetic. "So he had," he said. "But as soon as he saw the aircraft on the radar screen, he asked me to let him do this one as well."

Marsden was at three hundred feet, and his Swordfish was unarmed. The Junkers were at three thousand feet, and had

two forward-firing machine-guns. It was not a pleasant state of affairs. But for an hour nothing happened. Marsden, as far as possible, kept to the shadows, altering course frequently to keep beneath the patches of cloud. But there came a time when the cloud began to thin out, and between the wide-spaced patches of cumulus shone a great expanse of silver sea: without shadow, without cover. Marsden was half-way across it when he got the message from *Viper* to close in; thankfully he altered course. A few minutes later his observer called him up.

"I think," he said, "we're being followed."

Marsden screwed round. Above and behind him he saw a glint of silver moving across the sky.

His observer's voice came through again.

"She's been creeping up on us the last five minutes."

"Watch her," Marsden said.

He banked to port and headed straight for the convoy, running for the protection of the warships' bofors and oerlikons. The plane above them also altered course. It began to close in.

Marsden saw that a little ahead was a heavy mass of cumulus; it was drifting across their path, driving a wedge of darkness between them and the convoy. He looked for the other planes; they were not to be seen. He wondered if they were waiting for him, behind the cloud. After a couple of minutes he saw a light smudge of grey break off and move upwind along the top of the cloudbank. He realized it was one of the Junkers. And seconds later he saw another, hovering beneath the cloud base. They had him cut off. Surrounded. Soon they would close in.

Three fast, well-armed monoplanes would, in daylight, have had no trouble destroying the slow, unprotected Swordfish. But Marsden had an ally now: the darkness. He looked about him, knowing his life depended on the use he made of what little cover there was.

Ahead of him was the cumulus, an unstable mass of darkness covering a couple of dozen square miles. Here, if only he could reach it, was temporary safety. He looked at the cumulus again, noting its structure. It was shaped like a crescent; its eastern tip—which was passing close to the convoy—was dark and heavy; its western tip was lighter, finer in texture and more ragged.

He began to alter course, a few degrees at a time, inching the Swordfish towards the nearest promontory of cloud; at the same time he cautiously increased height. For some minutes his

manoeuvres passed unnoticed. Then the Junkers above the cloud cottoned on to what was happening. It came sweeping down in a fast, purposeful dive. A second later a startled cry from Marsden's observer told him the plane behind them was attacking too, was diving on to them straight out of the moon.

They were close to the cloud now. In a couple of minutes its folds of darkness would be rolling over them. But could they last the couple of minutes?

The Junkers coming in from ahead opened fire too soon. From a thousand yards its tracer slashed at the Swordfish. Marsden swung slightly to starboard; then, as the German followed him, he cartwheeled suddenly to port. The Junkers couldn't turn as quickly as the Swordfish; the German pilot couldn't bank steeply enough to keep Marsden in his sights; his tracer, as he followed him into the turn, flashed always a fraction outside the Swordfish's canted wing. He hauled back on his stick. The planes turned more steeply; their wings swung vertical. Then the second Junkers came screaming in from the beam; her tracer slashed at the turning plane. Marsden flicked on to his back. Like a falling leaf the Swordfish toppled seaward. The Junkers followed. Between cloud and sea they wheeled and banked. Tracer ribboned the sky. The hammer of guns echoed back from the cloud. The moonlight poured down. Twice Marsden was only just in time to sideslip a vicious burst. Then, behind him, he saw the pulsating fringe of the cloud. It was mercifully near. He jerked the Swordfish round in a quivering stall turn, and the dark folds of grey came swirling over him.

Moon, sea and the attacking planes disappeared. The thud of gunfire died away. For the moment they were safe, wrapped in the enfolding veil of grey.

It was a new world they came suddenly into: a world that was silent, mysterious and darkly moving. Marsden concentrated on his instruments and climbed to the cloud centre. It was unpleasantly bumpy, with down-draughts and up-currents plucking at the plane, but at least there was no icing, and he could keep her under control. He decided to make for the westerly tip (which was farthest from the convoy); with luck, he thought, the planes will be waiting at the easterly tip, expecting us to break cover close to the ships.

Soon the cloud began to thin out. Visibility improved. Through patches of wispy grey he caught occasional glimpses of the sea.

Then he broke out into open moonlit sky. The planes were nowhere to be seen.

He dropped to sea level, and began a wide detour which brought him an hour later back to the carrier.

He went at once to the bridge. There he found the First Lieutenant—Jardine and Halsey were below at a staff conference—and the Commander told him that the patrol following his had been shot down in flames.

Marsden shut his eyes. It's funny, he thought, how things work out: how we bring about the very things we try to avoid. Now, of his squadron's fifteen Swordfish only seven were left. Inexorably, plane by plane, the convoy was being stripped of its defences. By the time they came to Kola Bay, to the final testing ground, they might well, he realized, be too weak to resist the last assault.

It was this same thought that had prompted Jardine to call his staff conference—for, from the events of the last few hours, he had guessed the Germans' plan.

"They've only two days left," he told his assembled officers. "My guess is this. On the first day they'll try to soften us up; they'll try to exhaust us with hit-and-run attacks; they'll try to grind away our air defences. On the second day, when we're weakened and when we're so far into the narrows we can't turn back, they'll throw everything they've got into one last attack. Now these are the counter-measures I propose to take. . . ."

That night three Swordfish and two Wildcats were trundled to one side of the hangar; and Aplin, much to his surprise, was told that he had twelve hours in which to refuel and service them.

January 11th dawned fine and clear and unbelievably cold. The sea was moderate; the wind was fresh; the cloud was broken and high; and with the first glimmer of daylight came the U-boats and planes.

There were about a dozen U-boats. They came at dawn; and at sunset they were still there, worrying at the fringe of the convoy. Not once during the short arctic day did they press their attacks home. Instead they skirted the advanced screen at a discreet distance, tempting the warships and Swordfish to come after them. They would certainly have succeeded if Jardine hadn't ordered his vessels not to be drawn away. As it was, the U-boats were ignored except when they closed too dangerously; when they did

this, a warship, a Swordfish and a Wildcat moved on to them in concert, pushed them back, then withdrew to safety.

The planes came not in a flood but in a continual nagging trickle; throughout the three-and-a-half hours of daylight there were always ten to twenty of them circling the convoy. They were torpedo-carrying Junkers; and like the U-boats they didn't press their attacks home; they came in singly or occasionally in pairs; they launched their torpedoes from an excessively hopeful range; then they circled the convoy waiting for the Wildcats to drive them away. If Jardine hadn't warned his pilots not to follow them, they would have fallen into the trap—and though several Junkers would have been shot down, the Wildcats too would have suffered losses. As it was the fighters spent an exhausting, unsatisfying day; hour after hour they took off, intercepted an attack, broke it up, then came back to re-arm and refuel; they had little chance of making a definite kill, and only two Junkers were shot down. But the Wildcats did what Jardine wanted. They survived.

At noon the convoy zig-zagged past Bear Island and stood in the narrows that led to Kola Bay. And still, well into the afternoon, the attacks were kept up. They were never heavy; but they never slackened off. As soon as Jardine tried to rest his fighters, the German planes came in more boldly. As soon as he tried to withdraw his Swordfish, the U-boats approached more threateningly. He had no choice but to keep his planes in the air; to fly them to exhaustion.

In any other carrier losses would have been crippling, and by nightfall the convoy would probably have been left defenceless, shorn of its aircraft. Yet, thanks to the pilots' skill and to young Jardine's batting, the only plane lost that day was a single Wildcat which ventured too far afield, was jumped on by a pair of Junkers and shot blazing into the sea. This was at two o'clock. A few minutes later a cloud rolled over the setting sun, and the Junkers began to head for Norway.

We've been lucky, Jardine thought. The planes he had set aside in the hangar for an emergency had never been needed. He watched his son, still on the batting platform, landing the last of the Wildcats. It's due to him, he thought, more than to anyone else, that the convoy is getting through. He watched his son shading his eyes, looking into the sunset. When we left Scapa, he thought, he was only a boy; now he's turning into a man.

Soon it was dark.

With the coming of night the cold grew more intense. Little flurries of powder snow drifted down from the belts of cumulus. The water took on a frozen blue-black sheen; and in it floated little globules of ice, hard, like diamonds, broken from the edge of the pack. *Viper* altered course to the eastward, standing into the narrows between the ice-pack and the North Norwegian shore.

Once it was dark the shadowing aircraft returned. Hour after hour they circled the convoy, always a little out of range. The technical experts who monitored their transmissions could hear them calling each other up, radioing their base, broadcasting to the U-boats now beginning to mass at the approaches to Kola Bay. The train of powder was being laid. Some time in the next thirty-six hours it would be touched off. What, Jardine wondered, would provide the match?

A little before ten that evening the Yeoman handed him a signal. The Yeoman had been bringing Jardine signals all through the evening: messages about the German planes; reports from Stone about the patrolling Swordfish; but this was a signal of a different kind. For the first time since the convoy had got under way, the Admiralty broke radio silence. Their message was brief: "*Brandenberg* and six Z class destroyers left Porsanger Fjord at 1900 hours. Their course 020°, speed 15 knots."

CHAPTER TEN

NOWHERE in the world is there a more tempestuous battleground of wind and water than at the mouth of Porsanger Fjord. Here, on the northernmost tip of Europe, winds from the Siberian plateaux meet waves that have swept a thousand miles, unchecked, from the Greenland shore. Where they come together the air is torn into vortexes and eddies, and great whirlpools and water-spouts are sucked out of the tortured sea. Watching this eternal conflict are the Kiolen hills: silent and lifeless, snow covered to sea level and rising sheer out of the fjord. Here, legend had it, was the home of the mythical giants of Norse folklore: the land of iron and ice: the land where no man could live.

A little way down the fjord a makeshift boom had been built to try and protect the *Brandenberg* and her destroyers from the worst of the sea. But no man-made shelter could tame the waves that rolled into Porsanger Fjord. The ships jerked and bucketed

and dragged their anchors; theirs was a nightmare holding ground.

For five days they had been waiting; waiting for the storm to die and their sailing orders to come through. Now on the afternoon of December 11th the orders came at last. Late into the evening Aldis lamps flickered across the fjord, and pinnaces heavy with senior officers moved silently among the darkened ships. Soon the anchor chains were rattling inboard, and the warships in line ahead were moving quietly past the boom. They headed down the fjord. After an hour they came to the open sea. Rounding North Cape, they stood north-eastward heading for the drift ice. Here among the floes and icebergs they would wait; wait for the coming of the convoy.

Their sailing had been swift and silent, but it had not been secret. For at the mouth of Porsanger Fjord is a little hill that rises sharply above its fellows; near its crest a makeshift igloo had been cut out of the snow; and in the igloo were two Norwegian fishermen. One had died of exposure—for they had been there a long time—but the other saw the *Brandenberg* and her destroyers as they filed down the fjord. His radio set was tuned-in to the Shetlands, and within an hour his message had been relayed to the Admiralty.

The *Brandenberg* crossed Jardine's bows at a range of eighty miles. At such a distance no radar could have detected her. But Jardine, forewarned, had sent a Swordfish patrol ahead of the convoy; and a little after midnight the plane picked up the warships on the screen of her A.S.V.X. She cut short her patrol and headed back for the carrier.

When Jardine heard the pilot's report, he was reminded of Marsden's wager, made at the start of the voyage: "If the *Brandenberg* comes out," the C.O. had said, "I'll lay three to one we sink her." That of course had been when they had a full squadron aboard. Now they had only seven planes. But remembering that a dozen Swordfish at Taranto had sunk half the Italian Fleet, Jardine called Marsden to the bridge.

All that night the convoy headed into the narrows. To port was the pack-ice; to starboard was the North Norwegian shore; ahead lay the *Brandenberg*, and beyond her, at the approaches to Kola Bay, the U-boats were beginning to mass. It was a night to fray the nerves.

Jardine kept two aircraft continually in the air: and A/S patrol

circling the convoy, and a shadower watching the *Brandenberg*. Two hours before dawn the shadowing aircraft reported that the German cruiser was again under way; screened by her destroyer escort, she was starting to skirt the pack-ice on a similar course to Jardine's. For a while the two fleets ran parallel. Then, quite suddenly, the *Brandenberg* swung south: she increased speed, she headed straight for the convoy.

"Action Stations!"

The blare of hooters and klaxons tumbled men out of their sleep. Look-outs were doubled, gun-directors and torpedo tubes were manned, and in every ship the radar grids swung north-eastwards, probing the darkness on the convoy's bow.

By nine o'clock the *Brandenberg* was only thirty miles to the north. And she was closing fast.

So, thought Jardine, the holocaust will come with the dawn, with the pale anaemic light that round about ten o'clock will come crawling out of the east. He ordered his ships to battle stations, knowing that for the next couple of hours the fate of the convoy would hang in the balance.

One thing distressed him. Already, before the engagement had even started, he felt desperately tired; felt his perception blunted by lack of sleep, his judgment impaired by the days of anxiety and strain. From the pocket of his oilskins he took a small bottle. He swallowed two benzedrine tablets, and within ten minutes his energy and confidence came flooding back.

In his sea cabin he explained the details of his plan to a handful of senior officers. The *Brandenberg*, he said, would expect the convoy to consist of an inner core of merchantmen, ringed by a circle of warships—those were the normal dispositions. She would hope to make a surprise attack; to break through the warships and get among the merchantmen—and if she succeeded she might well annihilate the convoy in something under an hour.

"But," Jardine said, "she won't succeed. For her attack won't be a surprise. We've a Swordfish watching her. We'll know every move she makes. We'll know exactly where, and exactly when, she's going to strike. And we'll be waiting for her."

"All escorts I'm moving on to the northern flank. That's where she'll strike. We'll hold fire until she's committed to an attack. Then we'll halt her, cripple her and with luck sink her. If need be we'll use the last of our Swordfish to finish her off. Are there any questions?"

It was a dangerous plan; for it left the south of the convoy unprotected. Also it involved drawing the *Brandenberg* close to the merchantmen; and the *Brandenberg* was a powerful ship, with a fire power heavier than any of Jardine's (and the German Z class destroyers were large, fast and modern). If Jardine drew them on too far, if he didn't halt them at exactly the right moment, they would destroy him utterly.

Agnew asked what were their plans for disengaging, in case the *Brandenberg* broke through.

"I'm not," said Jardine, "making any."

After that there were no more questions, and the conference broke up.

The *Brandenberg* came sweeping out of the north. The German Admiral imagined he held a trump card: the element of surprise. But the boot was on the other foot. Jardine's patrolling Swordfish reported his every move. Every few minutes the pilot's reports were passed to Jardine on *Viper*'s bridge.

"Seven warships in line abreast. Bearing 015°. Range 20 miles."

"Seven warships in line abreast. Bearing 008°. Range fifteen miles."

Jardine's cruisers swung broadside-on, to deploy their full arcs of fire. Guns and torpedo tubes were loaded. The radar antennae swung on to their target.

The light grew pale. The range shrank. Little flurries of snow swept over the waiting ships. A single Aldis flashed from *Viper*'s bridge. The match was dropped on the powder train.

Jardine's three cruisers opened fire at a range of 14,000 yards.

From a dozen six-inch and eight-inch turrets great banners of flame leapt into the startled sky. The clap and shudder of gunfire echoed among the clouds. Over the cruisers acrid swirls of smoke, and the smell of burning cordite streamed away downwind. For half a minute there was a shocked silence. Then, a second time, the sheets of flame licked out. In their light Jardine could see the snowflakes spinning and whirling; they were blood red. He focused his binoculars on the northern horizon. There, his first salvos were beginning to fall.

Half the guns had been loaded with starshell. High over the *Brandenberg* the sky burst suddenly to light. A galaxy of yellow balls, like spectral suns, came swinging down on the cruiser; she shuddered to a halt, bathed in their harsh, metallic glare. The

outline of her turrets, bridge and foremast rose sharply delineated out of the whirling snow: a perfect target. Again Jardine's guns rumbled out. And now, added to the growl of the main turrets, was the sharper bark of his secondary armament: the 4.7-inch and 4-inch guns of cruisers, destroyers and corvettes.

Jardine saw that the *Brandenberg* was hit; but she seemed to be neither crippled nor halted. He saw her, in the dying light of the starshell, swing broadside-on. He heard the snarl of far-off guns as she returned his fire. Seconds later there came a thin screaming as the shells scythed high overhead. She had overestimated the range. Then, unexpectedly, a salvo of starshell burst over the *Atalanta*—one of the Z class destroyers had got their range exactly—and Jardine's ships, in their turn, were bathed in brilliant light.

The two fleets swung parallel. Seven miles apart, their guns trumpeted out.

The convoy came under heavy fire.

Shell splashes straddled the *Atalanta*. A near miss buckled the bow of a corvette. One of the merchantmen was hit amidships; beside her funnel a fire began to glow, in dark uneven spurts. Then *Viper* was straddled by the *Brandenberg*. On either side of the carrier great columns of water rose steeple high, as the cruiser's eight-inch shells heaved up the sea. High over her flight deck the columns towered, like phantoms draped in transparent veils of spray; for a couple of seconds they hung poised in mid-air; then with a roar like a collapsing house, they fell. Great cataracts of water swept the carrier's deck. Shell-splinters knifed like molten needles into her hull. The crews of her starboard oerlikons were shredded to pulp.

The convoy reeled under the hail of fire. But the shells that rained on Jardine's ships were nothing to the hammer-blows that pulverized the Germans.

In the opening minutes of the action the *Brandenberg* was straddled six times and hit four times. She veered off course, belching smoke. Then she turned away.

Jardine guessed she was crippled. He shifted his fire to the destroyers.

Two eight-inch shells from the *Atalanta* slammed into the boiler-room of the flotilla leader. She slewed off course. She lost way. A blast of scalding steam tore open her foredeck; and through the noise of tearing metal her crew heard the hiss of water flooding

into her engines. They were beginning to abandon ship, when another shell landed flush on the bridge. The destroyer's fire-walls collapsed. A blast of hot air swept into her ammunition locker; and with a terrible internal explosion she broke her back and sank in a vortex of oil and wreckage and broken bodies, sucked down together as she dropped a thousand fathoms to the bed of the arctic sea.

Three more destroyers were hit in those first few minutes. Two suffered only minor damage, and managed to limp away; but the third was hit close to her waterline. Her speed dropped. She was hit again. She was set on fire. The fire spread. It gave Jardine's gun-layers a point to aim at, and soon a torrent of fire was raining on to the helpless ship. Hit after hit crashed into her. Heavy explosions tore her internally. She began to rock and tremble. A slow shuddering vibration loosened the plates of her hull. She was beaten low into the water. Splinters hammered like hail into her superstructure; and round her the salvos that fell wide tore open the sea, heaving great floods of water over her listing deck. At last she turned slowly on her side. Oil spread over the sea. For a little while she stayed afloat, her propellers revolving spasmodically; then the long waves closed over her.

The German Admiral's first reaction had been to stay and fight it out; to break through the warships, and get at the convoy which he knew lay beyond. But he quickly realized that the ships opposing him were too strong; he had run into more than he'd bargained for; he was not the trapper, but the trapped. He gave the signal to disengage.

One of his leading destroyers increased speed. Pulling out of line she cut across the bow of the convoy, making smoke. Soon a pall of darkness was screening the disengaging ships. Seeing the smoke Jardine realized that the *Brandenberg* was trying to escape; he knew that—damaged though she was—unless he acted quickly she would get away. He sent in four of his destroyers.

They attacked in two pairs. *Juno* and *Jaguar* went straight through the smoke-screen; *Dauntless* and *Defiant* set off on a detour, planning to attack from an unexpected quarter, while the *Brandenberg* was engaging the first pair.

The German cruiser picked up *Juno* and *Jaguar* on her radar while they were still in the smoke-screen. At a range of ten thousand yards she opened fire. The destroyers were hopelessly out-gunned but they closed in. As they came out of the smoke,

starshell broke the sky above them, flooding them in a light far brighter than a tropic moon. Then came the scream and hiss of heavy shells as the *Brandenberg*'s eight-inch salvos thudded into the sea.

Jaguar was hit; hit badly. Her for'ard turret was buckled and had to be flooded; her oerlikon and pompoms were flung shattered across her fore-deck; she lost speed. Then an eight-inch shell landed flush on her stern. She came to a shuddering halt. She had just enough way on her to swing broadside on and fire her torpedoes, but no hits were observed.

A little behind her, *Juno* kept on course, miraculously unscathed. She closed rapidly: 9,000 yards, 7,000, 5,000. The sea around her kept heaving skyward; splinters scythed through her bridge; a German destroyer launched eight torpedoes at her, which she combed as if on manoeuvres in the Clyde, and soon she could see the *Brandenberg*, could see not only the flash of her guns, but the great ship herself. With the range down to 3,000 yards, *Juno* spun broadside on. She launched her torpedoes; then she fled.

The torpedoes were well aimed, but at the very moment they thudded into the sea the *Brandenberg* turned—she had spotted *Dauntless* and *Defiant* coming in across her bow. The torpedoes snaked harmlessly behind her.

But *Juno*'s attack had served its purpose. The *Brandenberg* had been engaging her so fiercely, she had failed to notice the second pair of destroyers until it was too late.

Two explosions, long and deeply echoing, blanketed off the thud and clatter of gunfire. The sea stirred uneasily. The gunfire died away. There was a moment of silence; then *Dauntless* fired a salvo of starshell. Six dazzling balls of yellow-white soared high into the air, lighting the crippled cruiser in a pitiless, metallic glare, exposing the dark, still-smoking caverns where the torpedoes had exploded on her waterline. The *Brandenberg* had flung up her helm. Now, listing drunkenly, she fell away, wreathed in smoke and steam and the fumes of burning cordite.

Their work done, the destroyers withdrew.

They left behind them a ship that was crippled, but was far from defenceless. A ship that now turned like a wounded tiger at bay.

As the destroyers withdrew, the *Brandenberg* was left alone. In the momentary lull her crew worked desperately. Used cartridge

shells were salvaged; the heavy turrets were turned briefly into wind (for the cordite gases to be blown away); munition hoists and racks were restocked; below, watertight partitions were strengthened, damage was hastily repaired; and the engines were coaxed into reluctant life.

Their breathing space was longer than the German Admiral had dared to hope for. Soon the *Brandenberg* was again under way.

Slowly and painfully, at a meagre couple of knots, she began to limp away from the convoy. She expected, any moment, to pick up the British destroyers, coming in for the kill. But the minutes passed, and no destroyers came.

For Jardine could spare neither ships nor aircraft to finish her off. That was the tragedy: that he had the *Brandenberg* at his mercy—crippled, shorn of her escort, cut off from her base—yet he couldn't finish what he had begun. For in the south, on the convoy's unprotected flank, his Swordfish had reported a U-boat pack was moving in; and he knew he would need every plane and every warship to keep this new danger at bay. In twos and threes his destroyers and corvettes were withdrawn; his Swordfish were vectored south, and soon the *Brandenberg* was alone. Watched by a solitary destroyer that shadowed her by radar she went limping away to the north-west.

The U-boats had hoped to find the convoy scattered. But instead of a mêlée of frightened ships, driven southward by the *Brandenberg*, they met an alert, well-organized defence: a pair of patrolling Swordfish and a screen of destroyers and corvettes; something had gone wrong. Their attacks became unco-ordinated; half-hearted; easily repulsed. As soon as they found the convoy guarded, the majority of them submerged and set course for Kola Bay.

Behind the screen of warships, Jardine's merchantmen searched for survivors from the German destroyers. But of five hundred men, only thirty were saved. Two, more dead than alive, were hauled aboard the carrier. Their eyes swollen and sightless, their faces encrusted with frost and salt and oil, they were pitiable remnants of men. But they were the lucky ones. Their companions died quickly; died of cold, exhaustion and exposure, their lifeblood quickly congealing in the cruel arctic sea.

When the last of the survivors had been picked up the convoy again got under way. The ships that were damaged limped into the convoy centre. Speed was reduced to four knots to enable *Jaguar* and the damaged merchantmen to keep station. And within three hours of the start of the action, Jardine's vessels were again heading for Kola Bay.

Was this, he wondered, the victory he had dreamed of? Was the way to Murmansk open at last? It could be. For now, with every hour, they were moving into waters that came increasingly under Russian control. Tomorrow morning Russian planes would be giving them air cover; tomorrow afternoon Russian patrol boats would be leading them into the Bay. If no other attacks developed that afternoon, they were as good as home.

But what of the *Brandenberg*? He was torn between duty and desire; between his obligation to protect the convoy, and his eagerness to give the cruiser the *coup de grâce*. He decided reluctantly that he couldn't spare the warships to hunt her down—that would be weakening the convoy too dangerously. Nor could he risk his few remaining planes in a daylight torpedo attack—when losses would inevitably be heavy. He would have to wait until it was dark; then, if the *Brandenberg* was still within range, his Swordfish would stand a better chance.

The convoy moved steadily eastward.

A few minutes before sunset Jardine went into the chartroom to check the *Brandenberg*'s position. She was fifty miles to the west heading for home, for the shelter of Porsanger Fjord. His planes, if they went after her now, would be operating at longish range; losses would be inevitable. He sighed, and called Marsden to the bridge.

On the after end of the flight deck three planes were ranged for take-off. The engines were warming up. The pilots, Marsden, Saunders and Ellis (the senior Swordfish pilot), were strapping themselves in. Jardine, as he watched them preparing for take-off, thought what a pitifully small striking force they were to attack a powerful, heavily defended cruiser; but they were all he could spare.

Viper swung into wind. An Aldis flashed from the bridge. Marsden revved up his engine till the Swordfish hung quivering against her brakes; then he released her. Slowly gathering speed, the plane, weighed down by her 21-inch torpedo, went lumbering

down the flight deck. She sank over the bows, almost feathered the sea, then climbed awkwardly away.

Looking back, Marsden saw two blue navigation lights creeping slowly towards him. Soon the lights took up station, one on either side; he knew then that the other planes were with him, flying in close formation. It was too dark for him to see their silhouettes. He climbed to a thousand feet then headed westward, towards the last-reported position of the *Brandenberg*.

Their A.S.V.X. soon picked the cruiser up at a range of forty miles. For a while Marsden kept at a thousand feet, while the observers worked out the *Brandenberg*'s bearing, course and speed; then he took the formation down to sea-level, to avoid detection by the German radar. Close to the still invisible waves they flew on. After a few minutes a golden crescent swung out of the southern sea: the rising moon.

At sea-level the A.S.V.X. was less effective; and on the observers' screens the image of the *Brandenberg* faded gradually away. But by this time they had a bearing on her. They kept on course. And after half an hour her image reappeared: almost dead ahead, at a range of fifteen miles. The planes drew together. They sank even closer to the sea. The pilots checked their switches. Soon the *Brandenberg* was very near.

Marsden switched off his navigation lights. The planes broke formation. They swept in to the attack.

Saunders broke away to port. Skirting the *Brandenberg* he manœuvred himself upwind of her. Then he began to climb. Slowly the needle crept round the dial of his altimeter: 500 feet, 1,500, 3,000. Soon he was in position to drop his flares, two miles upwind of the still silent cruiser. He looked at his watch; another thirty seconds and the other planes would be ready.

Soundlessly, a thin line of sighting tracer came swimming out of the sea. It was well aimed. There was a splitting explosion, an acrid smell of cordite, and the Swordfish toppled seaward. Three of the *Brandenberg*'s searchlights leapt into the sky, their questing fingers following the tracer. Hungriily they swept from side to side, cutting great swathes of light out of the sky. As Saunders pulled the Swordfish level one of them caught him. A cold, metallic light flooded over the plane, throwing the outline of wings and struts into sharp relief. Saunders was blinded. Before he could take avoiding action, the other searchlights came sweeping on to him, intersecting him, pinpointing him on a tripod of

dazzling light. Then came the ack-ack: salvos from three dozen guns tearing open the sky. The Swordfish jerked, trembled and staggered.

"The flares!" Saunders shouted. "Quick. Before we're hit."

He held the plane level while the sky around them was split by vortexing explosions. Shrapnel the size of cricket balls crashed into their fuselage; the engine screamed in protest; the plane rocked; Saunders needed all his strength to hold her on course, while his observer tipped out the flares. Burning fiercely the arcs of light swung down on the *Brandenberg*—like fireships drifting in with a flood tide. Not until the last flare had been released did Saunders slip out of the searchlights; then he dropped to sea-level, and checked the damage to his plane.

Waiting to launch his attack, Marsden saw the flares come swinging over the *Brandenberg*. Bathed in a lurid blood-red glow, the cruiser turned at bay, smoke and cordite fumes streaming away downwind. Flames from her ack-ack pulsated out. Even as Marsden watched, two of the flares were hit and knocked spinning into the sea. The light about the *Brandenberg* grew fainter.

Marsden dived in steeply. He was within a mile of the cruiser before she spotted him; then as he passed out of darkness and into the light of the flares the cruiser's ack-ack thudded out. He swung the Swordfish sharply from side to side; then, crossing his controls, sent her slithering seaward in a breath-catching sideslip. But the fire was too heavy for him to avoid it all. The Swordfish shuddered as a salvo burst beneath her wingtip; she was thrown half on to her back, shrapnel beat like hail into the belly of her fuselage. By the time Marsden had righted her, the *Brandenberg* was very near. He pulled out of his dive thirty feet from the sea. His torpedo dropped. He flung the plane aside and fled zigzagging out of the flare light. As darkness closed mercifully around him, the ack-ack died away.

For a long moment there was silence. I've missed her, Marsden thought. But how could I, at a range like that? He banked the plane round and waited; the seconds seemed like hours; then came a long, reverberating roar.

The torpedo hit the *Brandenberg* amidships, less than a dozen feet from where, five hours earlier, she had been hit by *Dauntless*. A thin pyramid of flame leapt skyward. The cruiser shuddered to a stop. An angry glow lit up the holocaust between her decks, where her watertight doors had collapsed and the sea swept into

her engine room. Listing drunkenly, she began to yaw out of control among the wide-spaced waves.

But her guns still thudded out; and Ellis, attacking from astern, ran into heavy fire. He dived in steeply, with a minimum of avoiding action, trying to force a way through the curtain of flak. But in his determination to align his sights accurately, he spent too long on the same course. The gunners got his range. A stream of bullets ripped into his wing; a shell struck him flush in the engine; and, disintegrating, the Swordfish fell seaward. Ellis slumped forward; his finger clamped on to the release button; his torpedo shot clear; but it hit the water steeply, and sank. And the Swordfish, when it hit the sea, sank as quickly and noiselessly as the torpedo.

Saunders attacked last. All the flares but two had been shot out now; and the *Brandenberg* lay bathed in a softer, less garish, light. Downwind of the crippled ship streamed smoke and cordite fumes, and through these Saunders came in low, hidden by the acrid clouds and guided by the glow of the fires now raging in the *Brandenberg*. He was almost on top of her before he was spotted. The flak was hurried and inaccurate. He took his time aligning his sights; then his torpedo thudded into the sea; and it ran true.

It hit the *Brandenberg* in her most vulnerable spot; about ten feet in front of her screws. Her stern was blown entirely away. A wall of sea water crashed on to her already listing deck, and the great ship fell away. With the waves pounding into her, she was beaten lower and lower into the water. Then, very slowly, she turned on to her side.

She lay there for several minutes, wreathed in steam, torn by internal explosions. Her searchlights, still switched on, glowed chalk-white under the water. A film of oil spread thickly round her. Suddenly her stern reared skyward. A great whirlpool was torn out of the sea, and into this the *Brandenberg* was slowly drawn. Quietly she spiralled down, like a falling leaf on a still October morning, to the bottom of the sea.

The night returned to silence and to darkness.

Marsden flew low over the place where the *Brandenberg* had been. He dropped flare-markers; and they lit up the handful of men clinging to pieces of wreckage. Tentatively one of the German destroyers—which had been brought back by the sound of gunfire—switched on her searchlight. Its narrow finger of white swept over the survivors. The destroyer moved in to pick them up.

For a while Marsden and Saunders watched. Then they set course for the rendezvous where they had agreed to meet: ten miles east of where the *Brandenberg* had been attacked. Here they hoped to form up and fly in formation back to the carrier.

Saunders reached the rendezvous first. For a while he circled round, but there was no sign of the other planes. The night was dark. His Swordfish was damaged. With every minute *Viper* was drawing farther away. He wondered how long he could afford to wait. After ten minutes he fired a salvo of starshell, hoping Marsden or Ellis would see it and close with him. But no planes came. He wondered if he was the only one to come out of the attack alive; or perhaps he was circling the wrong position? At last he decided he could wait no longer. He set course for the carrier, alone.

After dropping his flare-markers Marsden too set course for the rendezvous. His plane was also damaged; and among other things his gyro-compass had been shattered, and he had to rely on his observer to keep him on course by calling out readings from the compass in the rear cockpit. Neither Marsden nor his observer knew that lodged in the Swordfish fuselage, within a few inches of this compass, was a splinter of shrapnel: highly magnetic. The compass was reading 70° off-true.

So in due course Marsden found himself circling a position which he thought was the rendezvous, but which was in fact well to the south-westward of where they had agreed to meet. He waited there a long time, and when no other planes appeared, he too set out for the carrier. But his course was not—as he thought—easterly towards the *Viper*, but southerly; towards the Norwegian shore.

Young Jardine paced the flight deck. Radio silence was in force, so he had no news of how the attack had gone and when the planes would be back. The strain of the last few days was catching up with him now. Since the dying-out of the storm he had landed close on a hundred aircraft; some of them had landed in snow-squalls, most of them had landed at night, all of them had landed when the carrier was pitching steeply. The only mishaps to date had been a couple of broken tail-skids, and one Swordfish rolling gently into the barrier; but all the time the strain and the tension and the lack of sleep had been building up to a climax. And now the climax was at hand. Young Jardine knew that if only he could land the striking force safely the end of his responsibilities would

be in sight—for tomorrow they would be within the orbit of Russian shore-based planes; tomorrow there'd be little if any flying. Now he waited tensely, keyed-up; listening for the engine beat of the returning Swordfish.

He waited a long time. The minutes seemed like hours, the hours like aeons. Then softly through the falling snow came the throb of a Pegasus engine. The tannoy clicked on. His father's voice, quiet and emotionless, filled the ship:

"Stand by to land-on one Swordfish."

My God, young Jardine thought, only one.

She came low over *Viper*'s bows, her Aldis flashing. Almost at once the telephone by the batting platform began to whirr. Young Jardine picked it up.

"Bats speaking."

"Halsey here, Bats. I'm afraid she's damaged."

"Badly?"

"The pilot thinks not. But you'd like the searchlight on her, I expect?"

"Please."

Three times the Swordfish flew low over the flight deck, winging moth-like along the beams of the searchlights. In their chalk-white light young Jardine saw the shredded wingtip and the shattered undercarriage. He shivered. He decided to try to land her well forward, to make her crash into the barrier before her broken landing-gear slewed her over the side. He picked up his bats.

He wondered who the pilot was: Marsden, Ellis or Saunders? He remembered Marsden's kindness to him, the way he had taken him under his wing, and thinking of the shredded wingtip and the shattered undercarriage hoped that the plane wasn't his. As soon as it began its approach, his anxiety on this point was relieved; for the C.O. invariably landed off a turn; this pilot used an approach that was long and straight. He guessed it was Saunders.

The snow eased up a little as the Swordfish came drifting in. Saunders realized he was being brought in high: several times he tried to throttle back and sink, but always Jardine motioned him up. And he had the good sense to obey. On his third attempt, the carrier's deck rose obligingly at the right moment. Jardine gave him the signal to cut, and the plane dropped vertically, from twenty feet, flush on the last arrestor wire. She dropped heavily but squarely. Her undercarriage snapped cleanly off. She started to slew towards the catwalk; but before she reached it she hit the

barrier. Her propeller, flaying into the steel meshes, held her fast; and Saunders and his observer scrambled out, unhurt.

The news spread quickly: the *Brandenberg* had been sunk; but elation was tinged with apprehension. What of the rest of their planes? What of their C.O.? The carrier settled down to wait.

Young Jardine sat huddled on the edge of his batting platform. He wanted to be ready the moment they came in sight. At first he felt certain they would come. He told himself that he would have known intuitively if anything had happened to Marsden. But gradually his certainty gave way to doubt. And after doubt, came fear. The snow fell softly; the waves sighed along *Viper*'s bow; the minutes lengthened into hours; and still the sky was silent and the radar screens were blank. At last young Jardine realized that the planes had been gone a full five hours. He knew then, with terrible certainty, that Marsden could never return.

The night seemed suddenly colder, the darkness more intense. Walking down the flight deck, young Jardine shivered. It was cold on the carrier; it would be colder still in the sea. The cold spread from his body into his heart. He looked at the sky and saw a single star swing gem-like through a rift in the cloud. You weren't hung there, he thought, by God. There's no God. Silhouetted above the bridge rail he saw his father's head and shoulders, outlined darkly against the sky. How can you stand there, he thought, doing nothing, saying nothing, feeling nothing? Isn't there a drop of pity in you? He covered his face with his hands; and the tears ran warmly between his fingers.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, and turning saw the S.M.O. The doctor took him below.

Later, when they were sitting in the wardroom, the doctor said quietly:

"I know it sounds trite; but you'll forget all this in time."

Young Jardine shivered. You're wrong, he thought, some things are never forgotten.

It was half an hour after he had made his attack that Marsden began to suspect their compass. It was not to begin with a suspicion he could attach much importance to; only an ill-defined feeling that things were not quite as they should be. Then the moon appeared through a rift in the cloud. He had been expecting it on their quarter, but now it swung into view almost dead ahead. There was no way of checking the compass. They could only fly on.

They had been airborne about two hours when Marsden's observer picked up a strange echo on his A.S.V.X., an echo that spread over nearly half the screen. It certainly wasn't the convoy. He studied it with growing dismay, for it looked like the shadow of a distant shore. As they approached the echo, and it gained in definition, his fears were confirmed. He realized then that they were hopelessly lost.

Soon, over the rim of his engine cowling, Marsden could see the curve of the coastline, standing out sharply dead ahead and fading away to darkness on either flank.

It was a shore of utter desolation that they came to twenty minutes later: great waves hammering at iron cliffs, and solidifying instantly into a fringe of ice. Inland they saw the tundra, mile after mile of virgin snow; and beyond it the dark sweep of the coniferous forests. It was a lunar landscape; a world with neither colour, movement, nor life. Marsden realized that even if he managed to crashland they wouldn't live for long in such a wilderness as this.

They turned to the left (eastward they hoped) and flew parallel to the shore, trying to pinpoint their position. The coastline had a depressing similarity. After a little while they came to a low peninsula. Beyond it the shore fell away to the south and they crossed the mouth of a fjord. On the farther side of the fjord was a rugged promontory, tipped with a lone, ice-fluted mountain. As soon as he saw the mountain Marsden's observer pinpointed their position: they were on the north-westerly tip of the Baranger Peninsula. They were able now to calculate the deviation of their compass; to work out their bearing from the convoy. Marsden's observer worked quickly—knowing that with every second their petrol was draining away—and almost at once he saw that they wouldn't have enough petrol to get them back.

They weighed up their chances, and headed out to sea, knowing that somewhere between ships and shore they would have to ditch. They knew they had only one slender chance of survival—that Jardine would spot them approaching on his radar, would see them disappear and would send back a ship to pick them up. It seemed a forlorn hope; a thousand-to-one chance; but even that was better than the certainty of freezing to death in the tundra.

They reckoned their petrol would last for another half-hour—enough for them to cover some fifty to fifty-five miles. And the convoy was ninety miles to the north. Marsden climbed slowly to

three thousand feet—the higher they were the better the chances of Jardine's radar picking them up. When he had done this he could only fly on, coaxing the last possible mile out of his already damaged engine. Behind them the coastline gradually faded. Ahead, the sea gleamed silver in the moonlight: silver and empty. They felt very much alone.

But after twenty-five minutes a faint smudge darkened the screen of their A.S.V.X. At first they hardly dared to hope; but gradually, as the echo gained in clarity, they became increasingly sure it was the convoy. They had just worked out its range—thirty-five miles—when their engine cut: cut stone dead.

Leading Seaman Forde yawned. Radar duty bored him. He'd better things to do, he told himself, than watch a great empty screen that danced and flickered like the panel of one of them queer new-fangled television sets; especially when any fool could tell that the screen would be blank for hours (weren't they out of Jerry's range; and the Russians never flew at night . . . had too much sense). He doodled absent-mindedly on his signal pad, adding the First Lieutenant's head to the torso of his favourite film star. He rather fancied himself as an artist. His attention shifted gradually from screen to signal pad. The number of drawings increased. An occasional glance, he told himself, was all the screen needed.

It was during one such glance that he noticed the faintest sliver of a shadow on the very edge of the screen. He told himself it was atmospheric distortion. He went on sketching the Old Man's head on top of Rita Hayworth. When he had finished, he took another look at the screen; he studied the shadow this way and that; doubtfully he tapped his teeth with his pencil. At last he got up; slid open the door of the Ops Room and told Stone he thought he'd picked up an echo, range forty miles.

Stone was busy with his U-boat plot.

"You *think* you've got an echo?" he said.

"I'm not sure, sir. It's so faint."

Stone grunted.

"I'll come and look in a second," he said, and went on adding to the U-boat plot. By the time he came across to the screen the echo had disappeared.

Forde sucked his teeth disconsolately.

"It was there a minute ago," he said.

"Where?"

Forde, by instinct, had jotted down the echo's range and bearing on his signal pad. To check his figures, he picked the pad up. Stone saw the drawings.

"Very pretty," he said. "Now come along with me. And," he added, "bring your pad with you."

Forde, breathing heavily, picked up the pad.

"It could only have been on the screen a few seconds, sir," he grumbled.

"You'd better save your explanations," said Stone, "for the Captain."

Forde followed him on to the bridge. For some time he couldn't understand what all the fuss was about; couldn't see why the Old Man was questioning him so minutely as to exactly what the echo had looked like and exactly where it had disappeared. It was a chance remark of the First Lieutenant that gave him the clue.

"If he *had* hit the coast," Agnew said, "and then headed back that's just about where he'd have got to."

Forde realized then that the echo he had looked at so casually might have been one of their Swordfish. But it was no good wishing now that he'd noted it more carefully.

When Jardine had extracted the last fragment of information out of Forde, he paced the bridge. Had the plane been one of theirs? The odds were, he decided, that it had—what other plane would approach from the North Norwegian shore and then unaccountably vanish? But what could he do about it? To the south lay the U-boats, and possibly the remnants of the Z class destroyers limping back to Porsanger Fjord. Once before he had surrendered to sentiment and had turned the convoy back. He had got away with it then, but he had sworn never again. And never again it would be. Perhaps he could send a warship back? Yet it seemed utterly out of proportion to risk a ship, and a hundred and fifty men, on the slender chance of picking up two survivors who might or might not be alive by the time they were found. He tried to harden his heart.

He walked across to the bridge rail and stood motionless, staring out to sea. He saw his son come slowly across the flight deck; saw him cover his face with his hands; saw the S.M.O. take him below. The things, he thought, this convoy is doing to us.

On the bridge he felt confined; boxed-in. He climbed down a companionway, and began to walk up and down the flight deck. It was still only ten minutes since the plane had disappeared from

the radar screen; if he wanted to search for it there was still time. His heart implored him to send back a destroyer; his brain warned him that the risk was out of all proportion. He walked on, hardly noticing where he was going. Then, acting on impulse, he went below: down to the hangar. Soon he was looking down into the heart of the carrier.

The heart was beating feebly.

A week ago the hangar had been a place of noise and bustle and twenty-three close-packed planes. Now it was silent; silent and near-deserted. Three Wildcats were secured in a far corner; two Swordfish, fuelled and armed, waited beside the lift. The rest of the planes had gone; and they would not come back. The maintenance crews were below—there were no planes left for them to maintain—only a skeleton watch, some dozen ratings, moved aimlessly about, like the caretakers of a long-deserted house. For several minutes Jardine stood motionless; his heart was thudding too quickly; his brain was a box imprisoning a fluttering bird. Then he turned away. He stumbled back to the bridge. He called for the Yeoman of Signals. He gave him detailed search instructions to send to one of the destroyers. He watched as a couple of minutes later *Dauntless* pulled away to the south. God forgive me, he thought, if anything happens to her.

The engine cut: cut stone dead. Marsden eased the Swordfish into a shallow dive, and they drifted down; the wind sighed through their struts; the sea rose up to meet them. At two hundred feet he turned into wind and tried to ditch diagonally, along the crest of a swell; but as he levelled off the wave-crest dropped away and left them stalling, thirty feet above the sea. Vertically the Swordfish plummeted down.

There was a tearing impact; a wall of water came crashing into the cockpits, and almost at once the Swordfish began to sink. They had less than a minute in which to undo their safety-belts, scramble on to the wing and release their dinghy. They did it with a couple of seconds to spare. Then the plane went down. As they tumbled into the half-inflated dinghy, the rope securing it to the wing tautened and they were dragged under the sea. Marsden slashed at the rope with his jackknife; it parted, and they were thrown to the surface. The dinghy was full of water now, flopping and swaying about; they couldn't see if it was leaking or simply waterlogged. The waves kept slopping over the gunwale; the water-level rose.

They tried to bail the dinghy out, but it turned turtle—if they hadn't tied themselves to the safety lines they'd have been washed away. So they lay motionless, huddled together on the floor-boards. Their rubber immersion suits were supposed to be waterproof; but always the water found a way in. Soon they were wet and cramped and cold; wet and cramped and cold and sick. After a while Marsden remembered their drogue anchor. Moving very carefully he fished it out of its compartment and heaved it over the side. Almost at once the dinghy turned into wind and began to ride more easily.

They talked very little at first. Once the dinghy was under control, they checked their equipment; tested their mae-wests for inflation, and connected up their safety lights. Then, moving very carefully, they began to bail the dinghy out. For a while their movements kept the cold at bay; but after about ten minutes they felt a slow paralysis creeping over them, a gradual congealing of their blood. Marsden suggested they did exercises to keep up their circulation; and for several minutes they flexed their fingers and toes, and swung their arms as vigorously as they dared. But in spite of the exercises, their limbs soon lost all feeling; their movements became slow and clumsy and unco-ordinated. It was then that they began to talk—for they knew that if once they fell asleep they would never wake. But at last there came a time when neither movement nor conversation seemed possible, and they could only lie huddled together on the floor-boards. Round them the sea water began to turn to ice; and once they stopped moving the ice spread, spread over their immersion suits, then over their faces. Soon their eyes sealed up.

Marsden's observer kept getting little black-outs. One moment he was riding his piebald cob along the Devon lanes; the next, sea water would come slopping over his face. He would splutter and cough and spit it out, and then drift back into his world of dreams. After a while the moon broke through a rift in the clouds, carving a cross of silver in the sky. His head tilted up, as though he were considering the cross; but the eyes that turned skyward were sightless.

Marsden didn't notice for some time that his observer had died. Determined not to fall asleep, he had begun to crawl round and round the dinghy. He moved slowly, painfully and with many lurches and falls. But he kept on. He wished his observer would get out of his way—it took so much extra effort to crawl over him.

The fourth time round the dinghy he gave him a push and watched him fall stiffly to the floor-boards. He realized then that he was dead. A lesser man would have lost hope. But Marsden was not the sort to give up. He kept crawling on, round and round. His movements became slower. His pulse weakened; his brain reeled; but his body managed to retain a fragment of life-giving warmth.

He was crawling round the dinghy for the thirty-seventh time when *Dauntless* found him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE ships moved slowly eastward. In the narrows the sea was calmer; the wind had dropped, and soon the *aurora borealis* were rising over the northern horizon. Jardine watched the blue-green lights as they flickered above the pack ice. He hoped they weren't silhouetting the convoy; he hoped that somewhere to the south they weren't spot-lighting *Dauntless* as she searched for the missing Swordfish. The destroyer had been gone for three hours now: too long.

Soon it was midnight. From the north came an occasional flash of silver—moonlight glinting on the ice. But from the south came no light; no message, only a sighing wind so gentle it scarcely ruffled the sea. I should never, Jardine thought, have let her go.

The ships moved silently on. The moon, reproachfully, hid behind a cloud.

After a while he moved to the other side of the bridge. He moved slowly, clumsily, as though uncertain of his balance, and when he got to the bridge rail he misjudged its distance and cannoned into the iron stanchions. The waves of tiredness were coming over him again, flooding in the more insistently for having been dammed back by the benzedrine. He swallowed two more tablets; and just as they were starting to take effect a lookout reported a light winking away in the south. It was *Dauntless* flashing her code letters.

"What luck?" Jardine signalled her, as a quarter of an hour later the destroyer came swirling into the centre of the convoy.

"We have one survivor," she flashed back. "Name, Marsden."

Through his tiredness the thankfulness welled up. The night seemed suddenly less cold. Marsden was a man worth saving.

The *aurora borealis* flickered and flared, weaved and weakened and died. The breeze faded to a sigh; the sea became flat as a prairie, and soon it was dawn. From the north, the pack ice began to close in, curving shoreward as the last eddies of the Gulf Stream were congealed to ice by contact with the arctic currents. To the south, the shoreline fell away, indented by a succession of ragged bays. On *Viper*'s radar screen the headlands of these bays stood out clearly; and behind the most easterly they could see their goal: Kola Bay, the last of the ice-free harbours, the gateway to Murmansk. This evening, thought Jardine, God and the tide willing, we'll be there.

The ships moved on, through waters that were motionless as glass. It was strangely quiet. A little after ten o'clock the sun heaved itself over the horizon. It was huge and evil and blood-red. Jardine had seen the sun rise like an oriflamme out of the Bay of Bengal, and like an erupting volcano out of the Caribbean; but he had never seen it rise like this; as though it was trying to swallow the sky. Once it had lifted clear of the water it began to swell up, like an overblown balloon; even as he watched, he could see it expanding, spreading over the sky. Suddenly, it began to swing towards them.

He passed a hand over his forehead; his fingers came away wet. Around the carrier the sea began to tremble. A strange opaque-ness filled the sky. Jardine looked at Agnew and saw that he was trembling. The Navigating Officer had gone dead white. The Yeoman was crossing himself.

Jardine snapped open a voice-pipe.

"MacLeod! On deck. Quickly."

The sun was like a meteorite as MacLeod came tumbling on to the bridge. It filled the eastern sky: a great circle of blood that men could stare into and feel no strain on their eyes, and reach for and feel no warmth on their hands. But the Met. Officer took only a single look at the sun. He looked instead at the sea, especially at the sea ahead of the carrier where little wisps of pearl-grey smoke were rising out of the water.

"Refracted light," he said.

Agnew stopped trembling.

"Explain it simply," said Jardine. "Something I can pass on to the crew."

"It's like this. Ye ken the waters ice-cuild. Well, the sun's warmin' it up. The change o' temperature is causin' sea-smoke to

be drawn off. An' the smoke refracts an' magnifies the sun. An'," he added, "the sea-smoke's thickenin'. Ye'd best be getting yon Swordfish back."

It was true. Already visibility had dropped to the length of a soccer pitch; and as the whiteness thickened and the blood-red sun was blotted out, so one by one the ships of the convoy disappeared; first those that were far away, and then those that were near. There was something frightening about the way they were snuffed out—like used-up candles—as the sea-smoke rose swirling over them.

Lookouts were doubled. Navigation lights were shown. Radio silence was waived; and the convoy reverted to keeping station by radar.

Jardine looked at the rising miasma of grey.

"How long," he asked, "is it going to last?"

MacLeod scratched his head.

"I wouldn'a like tae say, sir. Maybe one hour. Maybe two."

From overhead came the throb of an aircraft. The Swordfish was back, was searching for them in the swirling folds of grey. They listened as the engine-beat grew louder; it passed a little ahead of them, then it died away. She had missed them. A few minutes later they heard the beat again, moving slowly across their quarter; it echoed uncertainly among the spirals of sea-smoke; then for the second time it weakened and died.

Stone came clambering on to the bridge.

"Message from the Swordfish, sir. Their A.S.V.X. has died on them. The mist's blanketing the screen."

"How long's she been airborne?"

"A couple of hours."

"Tell her to circle us by D.R. plot. Until the mist clears."

Halsey suggested they dropped magnesium flares to guide her in; but Jardine shook his head.

"Just what the U-boats would like," he said.

The ships moved slowly forward. Above them circled the now useless Swordfish. For the first time since leaving the Shetlands the weather was good enough for U-boats to attack, and the convoy was without protection from the air. Undetected, the submarines closed in.

There were four of them: all that were left of the pack that had crossed swords with Jardine's escort the day before. They were hardly the barrier the Germans had hoped to string across Jardine's

path; but they were at the right place, at the right time; and the sea-smoke came to their aid.

All sounds were muffled, muffled and distorted. Jardine could have sworn that the thud of depth-charges had come from astern; but the "in contact" report came from a destroyer fine on their starboard bow. So even now, he thought, within sight of Kola Bay, they weren't yet out of the wood.

The blare of hooters brought *Viper's* off-duty watch on deck. The convoy dispersed to open formation. The ships began to zig-zag.

Again the depth-charges rumbled out, this time on their beam.

Jardine was hamstrung. His aircraft were useless. All he could do was wait for the mist to clear, and hope that for the next couple of hours his destroyers and corvettes could keep the U-boats at bay.

The U-boats didn't press their attacks home—they had tried that before; once bitten, twice shy. They hovered on the edge of the convoy, disappearing into the mist whenever a warship went after them. They launched their torpedoes discreetly, from extreme range. Out of the rising wreaths of sea-smoke the parallel ribbons of foam bore down on the convoy, aimed not at any particular ship, but at the centre of the area of disturbance picked up by the submarines' hydrophones. And in the quiet water, hidden by the mist, many of them ran true.

"Torpedoes!"

First to sight them was a destroyer, guarding the convoy's flank. She swung head-on, and the foaming warheads flashed past her, two on either side. She fired starshell to illuminate their tracks; and the ships inside her saw them, and they too swung aside; and before the torpedoes reached the next column of merchantmen they sank.

But in their manœuvrings the ships got out of station; in the wreaths of sea-smoke they became confused. One of them, slow to revert to her original course, went yawing across the bows of the neighbouring column. The crew of a merchantman close to the convoy centre saw the sky to starboard suddenly darken. There were shouts of warning, cries of fear, as out of the swirling mist great bows came lowering towards them. The master flung his telegraph to stop, then to full astern. Slowly, her screws threshing the water, the merchantman shuddered to a halt; then even more slowly she began to back. And across her bow, less than a dozen

feet away, swung the bulk of the errant merchantman. Before the master could think of a choice enough epithet to hurl at her, she had vanished into the mist.

"Torpedoes!"

This time it was a merchantman that spotted them first. Again the vessels swung and yawed aside; and again the torpedoes missed their mark. But the convoy became yet more disorganized, the ships wheeling and circling in the mist like a covey of disturbed partridge.

Jardine gritted his teeth. If this went on, sooner or later a merchantman would be hit. What was it he had sworn? No matter what else he lost, he'd not lose his merchantmen. He ordered a pair of destroyers to leave the convoy, to head straight for the U-boats; and in spite of the mist he ordered his last two Swordfish into the air.

The destroyers, as they pulled away from the convoy, knew what they had to do. They moved forward very slowly (their bows cutting the water with neither sound nor ripple) and very quietly (hoping the U-boats' hydrophones would fail to pick them up). Above them, distorted and half-hidden by the mist, hung the haloed disc of the sun: vast, blood-red and so near that it seemed as if the masthead lookout could pluck it out of the sky. Around them rose the sea-smoke; phantom trails of white. The destroyers were both hunters and hunted. And they knew it: knew that as they stalked the U-boats, so the U-boats would be stalking them.

Soon, only a couple of miles from the fringe of the convoy, the leading destroyer was in contact. The ping of her Asdic echoing throughout the ship, she moved in silently to the attack. And just as silently another U-boat rose on her beam and launched a salvo of eight torpedoes. And hidden by the shrouds of sea-smoke they ran true.

The destroyer saw them too late. She tried to turn, but before she could swing head-on, the last of the salvo thudded into her about ten feet from her bow. She shuddered to a halt. A waft of pressurized air tore open her fo'c'sle, and she fell away, steam from her broken boilers rising skyward and mingling with the columns of mist. If she hadn't been moving slowly, and if the torpedo hadn't struck her obliquely, she would have sunk at once. As it was she stayed afloat, crippled and listing, while the second destroyer, coming up from astern, swept down on her attacker.

Depth-charges tore open the sea, and as the water subsided the

crew of the second destroyer saw, spreading across the water, a widening patch of oil. It was heartening if inconclusive evidence. With other U-boats about they couldn't follow it up; but to judge from the amount of oil, one of the pack had been at least badly damaged. An eye for an eye, the destroyer captain thought as he headed back for his crippled colleague.

He found the first destroyer listing to twenty degrees, down by the bows, and "blowing off" like a harpooned whale. But she was still under way, limping erratically among the rising columns of sea-smoke. The two ships circled each other, their signal lamps a-flicker.

They decided that the damaged destroyer was hit too badly to reach Murmansk. She would have to head for the entrance to Kola Bay; there, on the mud-flats of the Tuloma River, she would try to run aground.

She was now thirty miles from the entrance to the bay.

Alone, she would never have stood a chance; the U-boats would have followed her, would have pulled her down—as a wolf pack an injured bear. But the second destroyer stayed with her. Together the two ships dropped astern of the convoy. Together they steered a slow and painfully erratic course for the Tuloma estuary. And together they kept the U-boats at bay. Depth-charges patterned the sea, as again and again the undamaged destroyer drove their attackers off. Twice torpedoes were fired; but each time they missed by a hair's-breadth. And at last, baulked of an easy prey, the U-boats lost heart. Frustrated, they went back to the convoy.

The ships moved on, alone.

But soon the bows of the damaged destroyer sank even lower into the sea; her list increased; her speed dropped. Anxiously, her companion circled her, sending her encouraging signals. But signals couldn't dam the sea: the sea that flooded in faster than the pumps could pump it out. The destroyer's bow dropped even farther; soon she was barely under way.

It was about the time that the sea-smoke began to lift that her fellow-destroyer took her in tow. And the tow-rope helped to keep her bow up. If the sea hadn't been a flat calm they would never have reached the shore. As it was, even through waters that were smooth as glass, it took them three hours to cover the last twenty miles.

It was dusk as the tow-rope was slipped. Quietly the damaged

destroyer, continuing under way, slid with a sigh on to the Tuloma flats. The oozing mud sucked and plucked at her bows. She was held fast. Her crew waded ashore.

In the gathering darkness her fellow-destroyer left her. Moving quickly while a faint sheen of daylight still lingered on the sea, she passed through the entrance to Kola Bay: the entrance through which, half an hour before, the ships of Jardine's convoy had filed in line ahead, silhouettes of ebony against a setting sun.

After the destroyer had been torpedoed the attacks on the convoy slackened off. Jardine's plan had worked: his sacrifice of the warships had not been in vain. For the U-boats now became divided, some following the merchantmen, others the destroyers. And once they had split up, their attacks lost weight, were easier to withstand. Soon, to add to their discomfort, the sea-smoke began to rise.

It rose with unexpected suddenness, the rays of the sun, as soon as they reached a certain temperature, sucking up the smoke like blotting-paper absorbing ink. Soon the ships were surrounded by rising columns of white that disappeared skyward like the tail-ends of ropes in the Indian rope trick. Through the mist the sky shone azure-blue; and in the sky were Jardine's Swordfish; and the U-boats had had more than enough of the Swordfish. They lacked the stomach for a last desperate assault. Faced again with a combined screen of warships and planes, they quietly submerged, and as quietly crept aside.

The way to Murmansk lay open.

Had the U-boats realized how thinly the forces opposing them were stretched, they would have stayed to fight. But they had no means of knowing that the carrier, which for ten days had frustrated their every assault, had only three aircraft left. They went deep; and they didn't surface until it was dark.

Slowly, unmolested, the ships moved into Kola Bay.

Jardine looked at the Russian shoreline, now visible to the naked eye. So they were home at last. I ought, he thought, to be happy. Yet somehow happiness eluded him. Relief he felt, relief that the voyage was almost over. And thankfulness; thankfulness that of all his merchantmen not one had been lost through enemy action. That, he knew, was something to be proud of. But overshadowing every other feeling was his tiredness: the cramp in his legs, the blood-red haze in front of his eyes, and the fluttering of pinioned birds inside his brain. He felt the waves of faintness flooding over

him again. He fought them off. Soon, he thought, I'll be able to sleep (and he knew he had never longed for anything quite so much); but not yet; not till we're inside the bay.

He turned *Viper* into wind, and two of his Swordfish came drifting down to land; the third plane he decided to keep airborne till they were inside the bay itself.

As the carrier swung round young Jardine clambered on to the batting platform. He too was tired, as tired as his father. Earlier that afternoon, as a point of interest, Stone had worked out how many planes he had landed-on since—ten days before—*Viper* had left the Shetlands. The total was three hundred and twenty-seven: forty planes a day: an average of nearly two an hour—yet the number of serious crashes could be counted on the fingers of a single hand. Even for two batsmen the strain of such a programme would have been near unendurable: for a single man it had been crippling. Now, for the three-hundred-and-twenty-eighth time, as the Swordfish drifted in, young Jardine keyed up his perceptions, and tautened his nerves. I mustn't, he thought, slacken off at the eleventh hour.

The first plane landed safely, thudding down dead central, exactly opposite the batting platform. While it was being wheeled on to the lift and taken below, young Jardine paced the catwalk. From the opposite side of the flight deck the S.M.O. watched him carefully.

The second Swordfish came in off a long, especially careful, approach. In the dying moments of the convoy, everyone was making a conscious effort not to relax, not to fall victim to over-confidence. He held his bats level; and when the plane touched down safely, *Viper* herself seemed to sigh with relief. Now there was only one to come.

The carrier swung back into formation; the convoy moved slowly past the snow-white shore; the last A/S patrol circled overhead. By two o'clock the ships were very close to the entrance to Kola Bay.

Light was ebbing from the sky, when over the hills swept a formation of Mustangs and Aerocobras (American planes with Russian markings). They flew low over the convoy, their leader wagging his wings. And a few minutes later, fine on their starboard bow, a light started to wink; it was a Russian minesweeper, waiting to guide them in.

The sun was setting as they manoeuvred to enter the bay. Its rays

pricked out the ships in golden filigree as they filed through the headlands of the Tuloma Estuary: ahead the *Atalanta*; next the merchantmen, destroyers and corvettes; last the *Viper*. Sunlight slanted across the carrier's bridge. It hurt Jardine's eyes. He was only half conscious of what was happening around him: of the Senior Officers who were congratulating him; of the signals that were flooding in from the ships of his escort. He smiled and blinked and nodded as the bridge around him filled with chatter and bustle and laughter; and the bird in his brain fluttered madly and beat its pinioned wings.

"And we did it with so few losses," he heard Agnew say.

The bird stopped its fluttering. Inside his head was a sudden silence, like the silence in a room where a clock that was ticking stops.

"No," he said, "our losses were heavy."

Maitland and Sidwell, Green and Tewson, Ellis and Heywood and Blake: the names echoed inside his brain. He put a hand to his head, which felt suddenly empty. *Viper*'s flight deck began to undulate. A greyness covered his eyes, and he fell stiffly, like a man in an epileptic fit. Halsey caught him before he hit the deck.

They carried him below and laid him out on his bunk. The S.M.O. took his pulse and loosened his clothing; then he found, in the pocket of his oilskins, the bottle of benzedrine tablets. I wonder, he thought, how many he's taken? He spent the best part of half an hour in Jardine's cabin. When he left him the Captain was in his pyjamas and asleep, and likely to remain that way for all of forty-eight hours. The doctor knew that clinically speaking there was nothing seriously the matter with him—though what the long-term effect of so much cumulative strain would be, time alone would tell. He looked round the cabin. Jardine's writing-desk was open, and inside it a photograph of his son lay on its side, sticking out of a pigeon-hole. The doctor picked it up. A good likeness, he thought. He stood the photograph on a table at the side of the Captain's bunk.

Once they were inside the bay, Agnew ordered the last of their Swordfish to land-on. *Viper* turned into wind, and as the rest of the convoy passed down-river to Vaengar—the port of Murmansk—the carrier waited for her final plane.

An evening breeze was blowing offshore, going out with the tide.

The light was grey, the waves were smooth and oily. It was very quiet.

Young Jardine held his bats at "steady", as out of the twilight the plane came drifting in. She came in smoothly, carefully, off a shallow descending turn. Soon she was level with the round-down, poised over the carrier's stern. Jardine took a half step forward. Another fraction of a second and he'd have given the pilot the signal to cut. His wrists dropped as he started to swing down the bats. Then on the back of his neck he felt a blast of hot air, accompanied by the smell of burning oil. He knew what would happen next.

The Swordfish flickered as though caught in an air pocket, her port wingtip dropped; she slewed sideways; she came lurching straight for the batting platform.

It had all happened before.

A cry of fear rose thinly into the night. The men in the catwalk flung themselves to the deck. Young Jardine didn't have time to think. He acted by instinct. He took a pace backward and waved the Swordfish to starboard, trying desperately in the fraction of a second left him to align her centrally with the deck. And the pilot saw his signal. With a last-second flick of aileron and rudder he wrenched the plane level; and she landed safely—safely but on the very edge of the flight deck. Her wingtip swept at seventy miles an hour over the face of the batting platform.

Young Jardine leapt aside. But he wasn't quite in time. The lower wing smashed into the padded shoulder of his flying jacket, and he was spun toppling into the safety net.

For a second he lay spreadeagled among the yielding strands of netting. He was more shocked than stunned. Then he remembered the Swordfish. Scrambling to his feet, he saw that the plane had been jerked to a stop on the very extremity of the deck. The pilot and observer were tumbling out, unhurt. But it had been a near thing.

Before anyone had had time to recover from the shock, the Deck Officer was scurrying about the flight deck, asking questions, making notes. As soon as he had collected all the information he needed he hurried below, and in the quiet of his cabin sat down to write his official report. For now at last he had all the facts, all the evidence.

"*To their Lords Commissioners,*" he began, "*a report is enclosed on the landing operations aboard H.M.S. Viper between December*

2nd and December 13th, 1944. . . ." There followed a detailed analysis of the four occasions during their passage to Murmansk when an aircraft approaching to land had drifted suddenly, inexplicably, and on two occasions fatally, to port. Then came the kernel of what he had to say.

"Each time that an accident took place, the wind was light and swinging from dead ahead to fifteen degrees on the starboard bow; also on each occasion the carrier was steaming at 14 knots. In order to maintain this speed it is common practice among Engineer Officers to set the engine revolution-counters to "normal full" which gives a speed of 14.05 knots; the excess speed is then compensated for by the periodic idling of the engines.

"It is submitted that the cause of the accidents was as follows. With the carrier travelling at 14 knots, the engines would be subjected to occasional sudden increases in tempo, following the periods of idling. On these occasions there would naturally be a sudden discharge of fumes from the port vents.¹ These fumes would be hot, would smell of burnt oil and would leave the vents in the form of a current of warm air. Under normal conditions this current would be swept directly astern of the carrier; but with the wind swinging from about ten or fifteen degrees on the starboard bow, it would be swept directly into the path of an aircraft approaching to land. An aircraft flying close to its stalling speed and being struck by such a current would naturally become out of control."

The Deck Officer filled another couple of pages with comments and suggestions. He was glad he had collected so conclusive a weight of evidence; glad he hadn't discussed his theory before he was able to substantiate it. He signed his report with a flourish. This, he felt sure, had been the right way to do things; this way all the credit would fall where it was most deserved. On himself.

Young Jardine sat on his batting platform watching the stars swing one by one into a velvet sky. He wanted to keep awake until *Viper* had dropped anchor inside Vaengar boom.

The flight deck was deserted now; the barrier was lowered; the safety nets were furled. It was the end of the voyage. It was the end too of other things: of his uncertainty and fear and foolish pride. He was at peace with himself at last. He knew that when the final

¹These vents are the carrier's funnels, built into the superstructure below and a little aft of the bridge.

Swordfish had come side-slipping on top of him, he hadn't had time to think; he hadn't had time to reason "Now this is what I must do"; he had acted instinctively. Courage had come to him as if it had been his birthright. Yet he hadn't always been brave. That he knew. It was the convoy that had made him that way.

He settled himself more comfortably against the bridge-rail, and watched the shore drift slowly past; low, snow-covered hills less than a couple of miles away. Between the ship and the shore the tide was ebbing fast: tumbling, luminous and phosphorescent. He looked at it and shivered. When the war's over, he thought, I'll never come back to the sea. Never again.

He wondered if he ought to go below to see his father; but the physical effort of getting up was more than he felt capable of. He suddenly realized that the thought of his father no longer brought any terror with it. No longer need he struggle to prove and justify himself. What his father thought of him no longer mattered. For now he knew himself, knew what manner of man he was, and saw in himself nothing of which he need be ashamed. As a snake sloughs off its skin, he left behind at that moment all the years of hero-worship and make-believe and imitation. He was a man at last.

He sat hunched up on his bathing platform, watching the sea and the shore and the sky. In his mind was a pool of sleep, a pool he had managed for the last eight days to keep dammed back. But now quite suddenly the pool broke its banks, tiredness came flooding over him, and he slumped sideways against the deck-rail, fast asleep.

Down in his cabin Captain Jardine also slept, the photograph of his son beside his bed.

In single file the ships moved slowly upriver. Soon they came to the boom at the entrance to Vaengar harbour; once inside they dropped anchor. Their battles too were over. Above them the sky was silent with stars; around them the water was motionless as sleep. Now, at the end of the voyage, they and all aboard them could rest at last.



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